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*The Luckiest Lady*

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NOVELS AND STORIES BY  
RUBY M. AYRES



The Luckiest Lady  
Wynne of Windwhistle  
The Man the Women Loved  
Spilt Music  
Overheard  
Charity's Chosen  
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Invalided Out  
A Man of His Word  
The Dancing Master  
The Marriage of Barry Wicklow

HODDER AND  
STOUGHTON  
Ltd., London



*The*  
*Luckiest Lady*

BY  
*RUBY M. AYRES*

*The winds will blow and go, the seas roll on,  
Though all you loved be gone.*

*HODDER AND STOUGHTON*  
*LIMITED LONDON*





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THE Little Flapper's first recollections of the Luckiest Lady were a bit vague and confused.

For one reason the Little Flapper—as George Paget nicknamed her—was only twelve years old at the time, and she had led a very trying and unnatural life, having been dragged round at the heels of a third-rate touring company ever since she was old enough to be able to stand, by an ill-tempered, much made-up woman whom she knew as “Mother.”

This woman was quarrelsome, and drank too much, and many bruises on the Little Flapper's arms and legs testified to the kind of treatment to which she was often subjected.

The Little Flapper's official name was Biddy Saunders, and she was a small, thin child with unkempt hair which would have been really beautiful with a little attention, and brown eyes that wore the expression of apologetic fear which one sees in the eyes of a lost dog. She knew what it was to be hungry and ill-used and insufficiently clad, and until she met the Luckiest Lady she had never known what it was to receive a kind word or to be really happy.

Fate threw her across the path—or, to be more correct, under the wheels of the Luckiest Lady's motor-car—one wet night in November in a crowded, muddy street just outside London.

It was a Saturday night, and the woman whom she knew as "Mother" being temporarily out of a "shop," as she called it, was worse tempered than usual, and had had too much to drink, seeing that she had spent the entire evening in a public-house, until, following a violent argument with another woman, she had been requested by the landlord to leave.

The sight of the Little Flapper, who for nearly two hours had waited patiently outside in the cold and rain, added fire to her anger and resentment, and after screaming abuse at the child and shaking her violently, she dragged her roughly across the road, regardless of the Saturday night traffic, and the warning shouts of passers-by. The Luckiest Lady's car was coming along just at the moment when they dodged out from behind an omnibus—coming rather quickly, for the Luckiest Lady had been late dressing that night, and was already due at a dinner and dance fifteen miles out of town, and Harnigan, her dignified chauffeur, who prided himself on his punctuality upon all and every occasion, was grimly determined not to lose his reputation that night. So when he saw the Little Flapper and the woman whom she knew as Mother dodge out from behind the omnibus, he put on his brakes so suddenly in order to avoid running over them, that the big car skidded badly on the greasy road, swinging half-way round, and knocking them both down after all, its back wheels passing right over the woman's body.

The Little Flapper's recollections were vague and unreal from that moment.

Afterwards, looking back upon it all, she could

only remember a sensation of being dragged face downwards on the muddy road, of a shrill, agonized scream, and much shouting.

Then of a young woman who looked like a dream, or an angel in a dream, wrapped in a white fur coat, beneath which one caught glimpses of a rose-pink frock, bending down to her, and regardless of her wet, draggled condition, lifting her up into her arms—such soft white arms with diamonds sparkling on them.

Then of a tall, good-looking man with a monocle, who stared down at them both and said :

“ Good God, Marna, you’ll ruin your frock ! ”

Then of the dignified Harnigan who came reluctantly forward to say :

“ Allow me, Madam. I don’t think the little girl is hurt. I think she is merely frightened.”

Harnigan was right there, for the Little Flapper had not even an extra bruise, but the woman whom she had known as Mother, after that first agonized scream, lay hideously huddled in the middle of the road, with the rain pouring down on her white face and dyed hair.

She was quite dead.

“ Dead as a door knocker,” as the Little Flapper heard a stoic policeman say to the dignified Harnigan. In his way Harnigan was more of an aristocrat than his master. He hated anything which he called “ degradading,” whatever he meant by that. He would far rather have run over a well-dressed woman than a badly-dressed one, had he been given the choice, and there was a look of unconscious disdain upon his wooden features as

with great self-possession he produced his licence, and delivered himself of the statement that he was in no wise to blame.

"The woman ran right out from behind the omnibus, gripping the little girl by the arm," he told the stoic policeman who was thoroughly enjoying himself taking notes. "Gripping the little girl by the arm," Harnigan reiterated. "And in order to avoid knocking them down, I applied my brakes, the car skidded—owing to the disgraceful state of the roads, I may say—and there you are! Looks like deliberate suicide to me," he added gloomily.

The tall man in the monocle spoke again impatiently.

"That will do, Harnigan. The police officer has my name and address." He turned to the Luckiest Lady. "Get back into the car, Marna. You'll catch your death of cold. The police will see to the child."

The Little Flapper turned dazed eyes to the lovely face of the Luckiest Lady—at least, it looked a lovely face to her in its sorrow and infinite compassion—although, as a matter of fact, Marna Paget was not, strictly speaking, beautiful at all.

She was tall and slim, and aged about twenty-eight, with auburn hair coiled in a thick plait round her head, and blue-grey eyes that looked dark by reason of her very long lashes, and a mouth that made the Little Flapper long to kiss it.

For the Little Flapper loved Marna Paget from that very first moment of their meeting, and she loved her with an unselfish love that never

changed nor faltered, right down to the end of the chapter.

And Marna looked up at the tall man with the monocle, and her eyes were indignant as she answered.

"Leave her to the police! George, how can you suggest such a thing. I'm going to take her home with me, at any rate for to-night."

George Paget shrugged his shoulders good humouredly.

"All right, my dear," he agreed calmly. "Only for God's sake get in out of this infernal rain. You'll catch your death of cold." Then for the second time he looked at Biddy Saunders, as she clung to the Luckiest Lady. "The poor Little Flapper's frozen to the bone too," he added. "Look how she's shivering."

That was how Biddy Saunders first got her nickname of the "Little Flapper," and that was how she came to be adopted by Marna Paget—or as Biddy always thought of her—the "Luckiest Lady," for at first sight it certainly would have seemed to the casual observer that George Paget's wife must have everything in the world which the heart of the most exacting woman could desire.

She had a lovely house in the most picturesque part of Regent's Park. The Little Flapper's feet sank into the carpets at every step she took, and the bed into which they tucked her that night was so soft and wonderful that she felt as if she were floating on clouds.

There was a pale blue silk quilt drawn over her little body, so fine in texture that she was afraid to

touch it with her thin hands, even though she had been given a gloriously hot bath with lovely smelly stuff in it. And there was a fire burning in the grate, bigger and more extravagant than any fire Biddy had ever seen, and there was a shade over the electric light that looked like a full blown rose.

In fact the whole room reminded the Little Flapper of the best and finest stage scene she had ever crept from behind the wings of a suburban theatre to marvel at, only it was all so much more beautiful, so much fresher looking and more real.

And when presently Marna herself came in to say good night, and bent over the Little Flapper with the light shining on her auburn hair and on the diamonds on her arms, the Little Flapper caught her breath in a sob of ecstasy and whispered :

“ Oh, you smell so *lovely!* ”

Marna laughed. “ Do I? You funny little child.”

The Little Flapper shivered as a memory of other nights flashed through her mind.

“ Mother always smelt of brandy,” she whispered.

When Marna went downstairs she found her husband standing in front of the fire in the big drawing-room.

“ So we don’t go to the Laycocks’ after all, I suppose? ” he submitted amusedly as his wife entered.

“ We certainly do not,” Marna answered. She shut the door and crossed the room to him with a little excited rush. “ George! she’s such a darling now she’s all washed and clean. I simply must keep her.”

“ *Keep* her ! ”

George Paget was a tolerant man, and he adored his wife, but for a moment he looked aghast as he stared at her flushed, eager face.

“ Keep her ! ” he said blankly. “ Do you mean—for always ? ”

“ Well, why not ? ” Marna asked defensively. “ I should love to have a child like that about the house, and we’re rich enough to be able to afford to have half a dozen.”

“ But—dash it all ! you’re only a child yourself,” George Paget objected. He was more than ten years older than his wife. “ We might even—it’s not too late—we might even—some day, you know, have a kiddie ourselves, don’t cher know ! ” He stammered, getting boyishly red.

Marna shook her head.

“ No,” she said positively. “ I am sure that will never happen. But of course if you don’t want me to keep her I won’t.”

It was an entirely unnecessary sop offered to his sense of authority, for in the six years of their married life George Paget had never once opposed his wife’s wishes, and had no intention of doing so now, though for the sake of his dignity he raised yet another weak objection.

“ But what about her people ? She must have some people besides that poor devil who was with her.”

Marna shook her head again.

“ I don’t believe she has. Something seems to tell me that she is quite alone. I don’t know why I think so, but as soon as I saw her there in the mud



and rain I seemed to know that she was meant for me to look after and be kind to."

George Paget let his monocle fall with an agitated click.

"Trying to make me jealous?" he asked with pretended fierceness.

Marna laughed, and stood on tiptoe to kiss his chin.

"You're far too much of a dear ever to be jealous of anyone," she said affectionately.

There was no better word with which she could have described George Paget. He was indeed a dear! A large-hearted schoolboy who looked like a man, he was the friend of the whole world, and he believed that the whole world was his friend. He suspected evil of none, and he never refused to help anyone in distress, nor turned a deaf ear to a tale of trouble. Sometimes Marna gently expostulated with him.

"One day you will find that you've ruined yourself by helping one of your plausible scoundrels."

But Paget only laughed and drew her to him.

"Scoundrels or no, I can't refuse to help 'em," he said gravely. "I'm so happy myself that even if I know I'm being swindled I feel as if it doesn't matter, and that I must go on offering my sacrifices to the gods for fear they should disapprove of me and take my happiness away, don't cher know!"

So now he returned Marna's kiss happily enough and said:

"All right, keep your Little Flapper if you want to and if nobody claims her. It will make me happy if it makes you happy."

Marna's eyes filled with tears.

"You're too good to me," she whispered.

He caught her hand in a big grasp.

"Too good to you! I couldn't be! Here—what are you crying for——?" He had seen the tears in her eyes. "What's the matter? Aren't you happy? Tell me—I'll do anything in the wide world——"

"You do too much already. You spoil me." She tried to smile.

"Something *is* the matter," he insisted. "It's not like you to cry, Marna——" He turned her gently round by her shoulders so that she was forced to look at him. "Dash it all! You're fretting about something," he stammered. "You're fretting because we haven't—because——" He broke off in embarrassment to rush on again. "I'm such a clumsy fool. I never dreamed—never guessed."

She laid a hand over his lips.

"You're guessing all wrong now, too. It isn't a bit what you think! It's only——" She hesitated, trying to find words with which to explain herself. "It's only that perhaps just lately my life has seemed rather empty and—*useless*! Oh, it's not your fault," she cried swiftly as she saw the sudden shadow on his face. "It's only—if I had someone to look after—someone dependent on me, to spend my money on! Oh, you do understand, dear, don't you?"

"Course I do!" George Paget declared stoutly.

He had never felt the loss of children himself, but he had sometimes wondered about his wife, dimly realizing in his simple way that women were different to men. So he said again with enthusiasm:

"Keep the Little Flapper if you like. I only want you to be happy, don't cher know, darling."

Marna flushed and looked away from him. In her heart she was guiltily conscious that she had not quite truthfully explained herself. No doubt children were wonderful. People who had them always said that they were, but there was something in her heart deeper than the mere longing for someone to look after and someone on whom she could spend her money—something which it was not possible to explain to her husband, for how could she say to him: "What I really want is someone I can love—really love. Someone of my own who will love me and let me love them so much that nothing else in the world will matter. You see, I've never really loved anyone in all my life." And yet that would not have been quite the truth either! She had married George Paget because he was a rich man, and because everyone had said that only a fool would refuse him. She had married him three months before she met Hugh Hubbard, or else—but that was as far as Marna ever now allowed her thoughts to travel along that line. She was afraid to face the realization of all she had lost; afraid to even think what life might have been if only Hubbard had walked into her life in June instead of September. He had not told her that he loved her, but she knew it without words, and when suddenly he threw up a lucrative appointment in London and went away to China with no hope of leave for at least five years, she knew why he had done that too. He knew what danger lay for both of them in constant meetings, and he knew that as long as he stayed in London

it would be hopeless to try and avoid one another, for he and George Paget were great friends. So he went away.

"You will have forgotten all about us in five years," Marna told him white-lipped, when he came to say good-bye, and he looked away over her head with eyes that tried hard to keep indifferent as he answered: "Time is nothing to some of us—and in some circumstances. I do not think it will make any difference to me."

And now he was due home. After five years, during which she had heard nothing of him except from occasional short, business-like letters to her husband, he was on his way back to England, and Marna was afraid.

"I did not really love him. Directly I see him again I shall know that I never really loved him," she told herself, but she was afraid all the same, for besides being a lucky lady, she was also a very lonely lady, for it had only taken her a short while after her marriage to discover that the poorest woman in the world is the one who has only money. She had so soon grown tired of travelling, of Paris and of Rome, and of spending money. Often lately she had even found herself looking with wistful eyes at little suburban homes with tiny gardens and red shaded lights in the front sitting-rooms, beneath which she sometimes caught the glimpse of a child's laughing face, as Harnigan drove her by in the car.

She thought that after all there must be a great deal to be said for a humdrum life which was not crowded with acquaintances, and so-called pleasures; a great deal to be said for small incomes that could

only afford a quiet happiness, even if that happiness had to be always clothed in shabby suits and unfashionable frocks. Marna no longer derived pleasure from buying expensive clothes; she could no longer get a single thrill out of a brilliant function or out of an extravagant entertainment.

Looking ahead she often felt as if she had come up against a high wall in life in which she could not find the door that would let her through into any sort of a future, always supposing there was one to be found.

She had tried to love her husband and she had failed. Six years of married life had left her with nothing better than a grateful affection for him, but with a heart hungering for something more.

Sometimes she looked at him and wondered why she could not love him in the way she wanted to; why she could not find her complete happiness in being his wife, but she could get no answer except that instinct told her that love is not an emotion to be controlled, and that it gives itself in places where it is sometimes least desired, and in spite of all resistance. With the advent of the Little Flapper, Marna Paget was rather like a child suffering from acute toothache which, for some unknown reason, for a time suddenly ceases.

"I shall be all right now," she told herself, when it was established beyond a doubt that Biddy Saunders was quite alone in the world save for the dead woman whom she had known as Mother, and whose funeral expenses George Paget paid without a murmur.

"I shall be quite all right now I have got someone

to be interested in, someone of my own to look after."

And so for a little while she was. The Little Flapper was like a new toy, and at first it proved to be infinite fun, choosing her clothes, and brushing her hair, and taking her about, and watching her wide-eyed gratitude and astonishment. But after a time the toothache started again, for the Little Flapper had not been a real cure, only just a narcotic, deceitfully lulling pain to sleep.

"Quite happy, darling?" George Paget would ask now and again, and Marna would hurriedly pull herself together and smile, and answer:

"Quite, thank you, dear," grateful to her husband for being so readily convinced.

And then Hugh Hubbard came home.

It was typical of George that he brought him in to dinner one night without a word of warning to his wife, merely opening the drawing-room door and demanding with a delighted grin on his face:

"Guess who is here with me."

Marna stood up, the book she had been trying to read falling to the floor, and all the blood in her body seemed to rush to her heart, and then away again, leaving her feeling faint and a little sick. For of course it was Hugh Hubbard, and presently she found herself shaking hands with him, and telling him stupidly that he had not altered in the least, and asking stupidly if it could really be five years since they met, and was he pleased to be back, and how long was he going to stay.

And she supposed that he answered her, but she could never remember what he said, for in her heart

was a torment of joy and fear, and of gladness and regret, for she knew that she loved him more than when he went away five years ago, and that since then she had just been marking time, getting through life, waiting for this meeting. And George went on, still grinning delightedly :

“ Thought you’d be surprised ! The old bounder’s been in town three days and never let us know. Met him by accident, and dragged him home. Don’t believe you wanted to come, you old rotter ! ” he said, thumping his friend on the back.

Hubbard made some sort of excuse.

“ I didn’t want to come to-night because I’m not dressed for decent company.” He glanced at his tweed suit. “ George wouldn’t let me go back to the hotel to change. I hope you will excuse me, Mrs. Paget.”

“ You can apologize to Marna while I go and have a wash,” Paget said, and he went off whistling light-heartedly, delighted with himself for having given Marna what he fondly believed to be a pleasant surprise.

There was a little silence when he had gone, then Marna said tremulously :

“ Won’t you sit down ? ”

She hardly knew what she was saying ; she felt almost light-headed with happiness, and when Hubbard stooped to pick up the book she had dropped, she said nervously : “ Oh, never mind ! don’t trouble ! ” and at the same moment she stooped to recover it for herself, and their hands met.

Marna caught her breath with a sharp little sound, drawing away as if he had hurt her, and the hot blood

surged into Hubbard's face and for a moment he stood looking at her as if not knowing what to do, then suddenly he put out both desperate hands and caught hold of her.

"Marna!"

There was no other word spoken, but they kissed as lovers kiss who have for long been parted, and it was only when George Paget's step, and the sound of his cheery whistling was heard in the big hall outside, that they fell apart, shaken to the very depths of their beings.

"How long did you say you are home for?" Paget inquired as he came into the room, and Hugh Hubbard said rather hoarsely:

"I don't know yet—I don't know yet——"

And that was the beginning of a month which was so near to heaven and yet not heaven, that often Marna told herself it must be hell, and sometimes she wished with all her soul that Hubbard had never come home, and sometimes she was terrifyingly near to hating her husband, and sometimes she believed that the only way out of it for all of them would be for her to die, only death was such an unknown thing, and she knew she dared not take the risk of being separated from Hugh through all eternity.

But at any rate the Little Flapper was quite happy. In her new life she blossomed and unfolded like a flower which for long has been planted in wretched soil, and is suddenly transplanted by tender hands into warmth and sunshine. She was eternally contented, eternally grateful.

She did everything she was told, and when Marna sent her to a day-school close by she valiantly



struggled with French verbs and unaccustomed subjects, never complaining or despairing. If Marna said she must do this or that, it was enough for her. She would have said her prayers to Marna instead of to God, only something told her that it would not be what Marna wished.

Her whole life and love and desire began and ended with Marna. How to please her, how to do little things for her, how to constantly show her adoring love and gratitude was the Little Flapper's only thought.

"But there is so little I can do for her!" she one day confided to the dignified Harnigan, when, as it was pouring with rain, he had been sent to fetch her from school.

Oddly enough Biddy Saunders was not in the least afraid of Harnigan. His wooden features and great dignity had ceased to inspire her with awe. Quite in the early days she had discovered that he kept a heart beneath his immaculately-fitting coat, and there, on a mutual plane of love and understanding for Marna Paget, he and the Little Flapper met.

"Are you married, Harnigan?" the Little Flapper asked him one day, and was dismayed at his very emphatic retort.

"No, thank you, Miss. No wimmen for me."

She stared at him with round eyes.

"Don't you *like* women, Harnigan?"

Harnigan looked straight before him as he answered:

"About as much as a cat likes water, Miss."

"Oh!"

This had needed some consideration, and a moment

or two elapsed before the Little Flapper said in a small voice :

“ I never liked them either, till I came here ”—and she shivered as she remembered the woman whom she had known as Mother, and all the other women who had dragged round with the third-rate touring company, with their painted faces and loud voices, and coarse language. “ But then,” she added aloud, taking it for granted that Harnigan knew of whom she was thinking, “ she isn’t a woman—not an ordinary woman. She’s an angel.”

“ She is that,” Harnigan agreed. “ But then,” he added, “ it’s not every day that you meets anyone like the mistress.”

The Little Flapper smiled up into Harnigan’s wooden face with sudden rapture.

“ And she’s just the Luckiest Lady ! ” she said eagerly. “ It’s like a fairy story, isn’t it ? I should think she’s got everything in the world she wants—at least, I hope she has,” she added devoutly.

“ Nobody has everything in the world they wants,” Harnigan reproached her. “ ’Twouldn’t be good.”

“ Wouldn’t it ? ” Biddy Saunders had to consider this too. “ What can there be that she hasn’t got then ? ” she asked, after a moment, in a puzzled way.

It was now Harnigan’s turn to consider.

“ One never knows, Miss,” he said at last. “ Maybe there’s something in the heart of all of us, so to speak, that we want, and never tell anyone about.”

Biddy looked profoundly interested.

“ Is there something in *your* heart, Harnigan ? ” she inquired.

"There is *not*, Miss."

"Oh!" Biddy was disappointed. "Why not?" she asked.

"'Twould be degradading," said Harnigan.

It was always his last word, always his way of definitely closing a discussion which was becoming embarrassing and so getting beyond his powers of argument.

Biddy sighed and gave it up, but afterwards she thought about it a good deal. What could there be in all the world that her beloved Marna did not possess? If there was anything, surely there must be some way of obtaining it for her?

She had a car and a lovely house, and lovely frocks, and lots of money, and many diamonds (she had shown them to the Little Flapper all lying in little beds of white velvet and locked up in a safe), and she had so many friends that the Little Flapper got humbly confused with them all and could not remember their names—with all, that is, except Hugh Hubbard, and he was different, though why he was different Biddy could not have explained. But the first time they met, the Little Flapper took him into her heart, and adopted him straight away. He had looked at her so kindly, spoken to her so interestedly, taken her hand in such a firm yet gentle clasp as he said:

"So you are Marna's adopted daughter. You must be a very happy little girl."

He was not at all a handsome man, unless steady eyes and a firm mouth and a quick smile make a man handsome. He was rather quiet too; especially when George Paget was in the room, hardly speaking at all

unless he was spoken to, and keeping in the background as if he felt happier there. But then George Paget was always so lively—always laughed so much. George Paget, who, so the Little Flapper told herself warmly, was just a “dear,” although she did not love him as she loved Hugh Hubbard. She liked to watch Hubbard from across the room, especially when he was talking to Marna—for then he always looked at his best and happiest.

Dolly Benson, who went to school with the Little Flapper, and who had been dubbed the “Big Flapper” by George Paget, also liked Hugh Hubbard it appeared. She was three years older than Biddy Saunders, and much older and more modern in her ways and in her outlook on life.

“When I grow up I shall marry a man like Mr. Hubbard,” she announced one day to the Little Flapper.

Biddy opened brown eyes of astonishment.

“Will you?” she murmured.

“Of course.” The Big Flapper was very emphatic about it. “And he’s the sort of man your beloved Marna ought to have married,” she declared.

“Do you *think* so?” Biddy said in horror. It had never crossed her mind that there could be any other man in the world besides George Paget whom Marna ought to have married.

“Of course!” The Big Flapper was more emphatic still. “Can’t you *see* what a lovely pair they make?” she demanded impatiently.

The Little Flapper flushed; somehow such words made her feel hurt and unhappy.

“ I never thought about it,” she stammered. “ I—I don’t think I *like* to think about it.”

Afterwards she tried her best to forget it, and yet from that moment the thought was always coming back to her, especially when she saw Marna and Hugh Hubbard together, especially when she heard that Hugh Hubbard was soon going away again—abroad somewhere!

“ Why is he going? ” she asked Marna wistfully, and Marna went on hurriedly turning the pages of a book as she answered:

“ His work is abroad—he lives there. He’s only been home on business.”

“ Oh! ”

The Little Flapper was conscious of a tight feeling in her throat, like tears.

She did not want Hugh Hubbard to go away; “ abroad ” sounded like a place a long way off, from which people did not come back for some time. She wondered whether Marna minded.

A FEW nights before Hugh Hubbard went away the Pagets gave a dance.

“ When you are a little older I shall give a dance for you,” Marna told the Little Flapper as she sat on

the side of her bed for a few minutes before saying good night to her. The Little Flapper squeezed her hand.

"Who are you giving it for *this* time, then?" she asked interestedly.

Marna did not answer at once. She sat staring down at the toe of her dainty slipper, her lips set tightly. Then she gave a sigh that ended in a half laugh.

"Well, I suppose in a way it's for Mr. Hubbard—for Hugh," she said. "You see he goes away next week."

"Are you sorry?" the Little Flapper asked.

"Sorry?" Marna looked away across the room. "I'm always sorry when people go away."

She drew the bedclothes more cosily round the Little Flapper's thin figure.

"To-morrow night you shall come and peep over the balusters," she promised. "And you may leave your door open so you can hear the music. We're going to have a lovely band."

"Are we?" The Little Flapper always included herself in the family now, although it was only five months since that wet night in the rain when the woman whom she had known as Mother had been killed, but the Little Flapper seldom looked back to those days; love and happiness had already wiped them almost completely from her mind.

"I'm so happy," she once told Harnigan. "So happy that sometimes I think I shall *burst!*"

"I shouldn't do that if I was you, Miss," Harnigan said reprovingly.

The Little Flapper chuckled.

"Why not?" she inquired, and knew beforehand the answer she would receive.

"Because it would be degrading to burst," Harnigan said.

But to-night Biddy was not feeling quite so happy as usual, as she lay there in the bed that still made her feel as if she was floating on a cloud, and looked up at Marna's face—a little pale it seemed in spite of the fact that she was trying to smile. It made Biddy feel as if there was a crumpled roseleaf in her bed—a very tiny crumpled roseleaf certainly, but still it was there!

"What frock are you going to wear?" she asked eagerly.

She loved all Marna's frocks. Sometimes if Marna was out for a day, and she missed her more than usual, the Little Flapper would creep into her room, and open the wardrobe door where all her wonderful frocks and wraps hung in awe-inspiring rows, and kiss them.

"They *smell* of you," she once explained to Marna. "If I just shut my eyes, I can imagine you're wearing them all."

"I've got a new frock for to-morrow," Marna said now in answer to her question. "It's blue——"

"You look lovely in blue," the Little Flapper said.

"And it's got a frilly skirt," Marna went on.

"And I've got a big fan to match."

"You'll look *beautiful*!" the Little Flapper said earnestly.

"Do you think so?" Marna rose from the side of the bed. "I hope I shall," she added with a sudden note of passion. "I hope I shall. I want

to——” And so she *was* beautiful, by far the most beautiful of all the beautiful ladies in the room, so Biddy Saunders thought, when late the following evening—long after she ought to have been in bed and asleep—she hung over the balusters trembling with excitement—gazing down at the throngs of people passing to and fro across the hall.

Such wonderful frocks! Such wonderful shoes! But none—none to touch those that Marna wore—nobody—not one, half so sweet and gracious, or such a *darling*!

The Little Flapper’s heart ached with love as her adoring eyes followed Marna to and fro. She was so sweet to everyone; she seemed to make everyone feel that they were the one person in the world whom she had wanted to see, and whom she was delighted to welcome.

George Paget stood beside her, very smiling and well-groomed (his monocle on a black silk ribbon which intrigued the Little Flapper immensely, for as a rule he wore it attached to a thin cord), and his hearty voice rising above all the chatter and laughter.

“How are you? Delighted to see you! Am I going to dance, eh? Well, it’s not much in my line, but to please Marna, don’t *cher* know.”

That was like him—to please Marna was all he lived for. And then the band—how perfectly wonderful it was! There was one tune in particular that touched the Little Flapper’s heart and made her want to cry. It was a waltz, so she discovered afterwards—a haunting, sensuous waltz tune that haunted her for days afterwards.

It was long past midnight when she heard it played,



and she knew that she ought to have gone back to bed some time ago, but—well it was so fascinating clinging to the balusters and looking down on the crowd that she could not tear herself away.

But at this particular moment the big hall was deserted; everyone seemed to be dancing in the long drawing-room, although now and then a couple—tired perhaps, or wanting to talk—wandered across the hall and out into the big conservatory which was full of lovely flowers and lit with shaded lamps.

Presently Marna came with Hugh Hubbard. They were not arm in arm as some of the others had been; they were walking a pace apart, almost as if they were not very friendly, and when they reached the foot of the big staircase Marna stood still and the Little Flapper heard her say:

“This time next week you will have gone, Hugh.”

“Yes.”

Hubbard was standing with his hands clenched behind him, and his face looked all white and queer—“As if he wanted to cry,” the Little Flapper told herself with a sudden pang of unexplained compassion.

Then Marna laughed.

“You’ll be glad to go?” she asked lightly.

He did not reply to that, and she said again:

“You’re not very polite. You might at least pretend to be sorry to leave—us—all!”

There was a queer little breathless pause between each of the last three words.

“There is no need for me to pretend, you know that,” Hugh Hubbard answered. And then for a moment they looked at one another silently, and the

Little Flapper's heart began to thump in a scared sort of way, and she wanted to move and run back to bed only she was afraid that if she did the stairs would creak and they would hear her; so she just stood very still, clutching the polished baluster rail with both trembling hands.

And downstairs the band was still playing that haunting, heart-breaking tune, and Marna and Hugh Hubbard were looking at one another as if—as if—the Little Flapper did not know what it was that she could see written in their tragic faces, though it vaguely reminded her of a scene in a stage play—something which always kept an audience quiet, and sometimes made them cry. Then Marna said in a high-pitched, unnatural little voice:

“Well, shall we dance?”

And Hugh Hubbard put his arm round her and they took a few steps together, Marna's head a little downbent against his shoulder as if she was either very tired or very sad, and Hugh Hubbard's steady eyes, hard as if with resentful pain, carefully avoiding looking at her.

Then suddenly they stopped as if by mutual consent, falling a pace apart again, and the Little Flapper heard Marna say as if she had reached the end of all endurance and could bear no more:

“So it's all over, Hugh—all over——” and then in a voice that was not like her voice at all, but like the voice of someone in mortal pain: “Oh, I can't bear it—I can't bear it,” and Hugh Hubbard made no answer—he just looked and looked at her with his face all white and quivering till she broke out once more.

“ Oh, don't go, don't go ! Don't leave me alone again——” and the anguish in her voice seemed to stop the Little Flapper's heart, and to rob her of all power of movement, and for a moment the whole world seemed to stop too, holding its breath until Hugh Hubbard answered that broken cry in a voice just as despairing and hopeless.

“ Marna—for God's sake—don't you think I'm suffering too——”

But that was all, for at that moment the music stopped and people began to stream out into the hall from the ball-room, and in an instant Marna was herself again, smiling and self-possessed, and Hugh Hubbard turned away and began to talk to someone else who came up to him, but the Little Flapper fled upstairs and into bed, sobbing, though she did not in the least understand why, and the world went rolling on once more.

And a week later Hugh Hubbard went away ; at least the Little Flapper supposed he had gone because he did not come to the house any more, and then Marna caught a bad chill, and was so ill that she had to go to bed, and when she got better George Paget took her away to the South of France, and they stayed away a whole month, and while they were away the Little Flapper worked so hard at her lessons that at the end of the term she was top of her form, and she wrote excitedly to Marna to tell her, and Marna wrote back a short little note which the Little Flapper always remembered, and which ran :

“ I am so proud of you and I am longing to see you, Biddy darling. I hope you have not stopped

loving me. I hope that you never will, because I want all the love you can give me.

“MARNA.”

And then soon after that she and George Paget came home, and though Marna was still a little thin and pale, she seemed almost her old self again; and life went on as it had done before, except that Hugh Hubbard was not there, and that his name was hardly ever mentioned until one day George Paget said cheerily:

“Never heard from that blighter Hubbard, have we? Odd that he’s never written, eh, Marna, don’t cher think so?”

“Why should he write?” Marna’s voice was quite calm and controlled, but she looked away from her husband as she answered him, and only the Little Flapper’s loving eyes saw the sudden bleak look of pain that swept across her face.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter III*

THE Little Flapper twisted and turned in front of the long mirror in Marna Paget’s room, then looked across at Marna with anxious eyes.

“Do I *really* look nice?” she appealed wistfully. Marna laughed.

“Conceited babe!” she said fondly.

She finished powdering her white neck and arms and threw the powder puff down on the dressing-table, turning to admire the pretty picture which the Little Flapper made.

"How does it feel to be eighteen, with all the world before you?" she asked with a half sigh.

Biddy smiled, wrinkling her brown eyes into funny little lines.

"It doesn't feel any different to anything else," she said doubtfully.

Marna sat down on the arm of the big couch at the foot of her bed.

"No, at the time it never does," she agreed with a wry little grimace. "It's only afterwards when you know you can never be eighteen again that you realize how wonderful it was."

Biddy came across the room and stood looking down at her with loving eyes.

"I wish I had known you when you were, eighteen," she said. "You must have been a perfect darling."

Marna shrugged her shoulders.

"I wasn't! I was a conceited little fool. I thought the world was made for me. I thought the only things that counted in the world were money, and what money could buy."

"And—aren't they?" the Little Flapper asked uncertainly.

Marna rose to her feet, putting the girl gently aside.

"Silly child, of course they're not," she answered. "You see——" she hesitated, then went on with

deliberation : " You see there are such a lot of things that no amount of money can buy—that all the wealth in the world cannot give you for your own—even for one moment."

The Little Flapper flopped down on to the big couch, one leg doubled up gracefully beneath her, regardless of her new frock.

"What sort of things, darling?" she asked interestedly.

Biddy loved Marna in a serious mood, it made her feel particularly grown up and important when she felt that Marna was talking to her as she would talk to someone years and years older and wiser. Marna took a cigarette from a box on the mantelshelf and lit it before she answered.

"Well, happiness for one thing, I suppose."

"Happiness!" Biddy considered the point for a moment. "But you've got happiness," she said at last in a puzzled sort of way. "Dolly Benson and I always think you must have everything in the world that anyone could possibly want. We've always called you the 'Luckiest Lady'!"

Marna laughed a little.

"Wonderful children!" she said, a touch of irony in her pretty voice. "And anyway, I was not thinking of myself, but of other women."

"What other women, darling?"

The Little Flapper liked to get to the bottom of every argument.

Marna waved her cigarette vaguely in the air.

"Oh—nobody in particular. Just other women!" she said lightly.

"I see," said the Little Flapper. She sat still for

a moment, then got up and once again gravely scrutinized herself in the long mirror. It was the Little Flapper's eighteenth birthday, and Marna was giving a dance in honour of the occasion.

"I can't wait till she is twenty-one," she told her husband when he entered his usual mild protest. "Girls come out much earlier now than they used to when I was young."

"When *you* were young indeed!" Paget protested fondly. "What in heaven's name are you but young now, may I ask?"

Marna shook her head.

"I am nearly thirty-five," she said seriously.

Paget said "Pooh!" in fine contempt. "I don't believe you're a day more than twenty. 'Pon my word, if you are, you don't look it. And as for young Biddy, I believe you love her far better than you love me," he added jealously.

"I love her in quite a different way," Marna explained gently. "And besides, you know you love her yourself and spoil her shockingly."

George Paget refixed his fallen monocle and stared through it with pretended fierceness at his wife.

"I only love one woman in the world," he protested, "and you know well enough who she is. However, give the Little Flapper her dance. It will make me happy if it makes you happy, don't cher know."

So Marna sent out her invitations for the dance and she bought Biddy an extravagant new frock, and everyone agreed that the Little Flapper was a very much to be envied Little Flapper, as indeed she was. In five years she had grown from a slim, pale child,

into a slim, pale girl—not very tall or pretty, but with a quiet charm of her own, and a soft happiness in the brown eyes that had once looked so scared and haunted.

Like Marna she now wore her hair smartly shingled, and she was sufficiently modern to smoke an occasional cigarette and drink an occasional cocktail when given permission to do so. But Biddy Saunders was not, and never would be entirely the modern type of girl. There was something a little shy and refreshingly old-fashioned about her—a sort of dependence upon other people which marked her out as different from Dolly Benson and other girls whom she knew of her own age. She was still entirely dominated by her passionate love for Marna. It was no exaggeration to say that she would have died for her. In every thought, word and deed, she put Marna first. The great anxiety with regard to her appearance to-night was only so that Marna should be justly proud of her.

“Do you *really* think I look nice?” she asked again anxiously, and Marna made a little grimace.

“Why are you so anxious to look nice to-night of all nights?” she demanded with pretended suspicion.

Biddy flushed.

“I’m not,” she protested. “At least, only because I want *you* to be pleased and proud of me. Think how awful it would be if people didn’t think I looked nice enough to belong to you.”

“As if I care what people think,” Marna scoffed. She held out her hand. “Come here, Biddy.”

The girl flew to her, taking her hand and kissing it.



"Do you really love me—*lots!*" Marna asked, rather wistfully. She leaned her soft face against the Little Flapper's bare arm.

"I'd *die* for you," Biddy said fervently.

Marna laughed.

"I don't want you to do that," she protested.

"But perhaps some day—well perhaps some day, I shall ask you to do something for me that I could never ask anyone else to do—just to show you how much I love you too, and how much I trust you as well, Biddy."

The Little Flapper flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, you do *really* love me, don't you?" she whispered.

Marna silently raised her face for answer and they kissed.

"And now, tell me what it is, darling," Biddy urged eagerly. "Tell me what it is you want me to do for you. You know how I'll *love* to do it, more than anything in the world."

But Marna laughed and pushed her gently away.

"But there isn't anything I want done, yet," she protested. "I only meant that some day there *might* be!"

"Oh!" The Little Flapper was disappointed. She had had momentary visions of starting off there and then to slay imaginary giants that had dared to cross the unbroken serenity of Marna's pathway.

"And now run away," Marna said briskly. "Have you forgotten that we're giving a dance, and that about a hundred people will be clamouring at the door in less than an hour! Don't worry! You look a perfect picture, and I'm proud of you."

Biddy obeyed at once, and when she had gone Marna went over to the fire and knelt down before it, holding her hands to its warmth. It was a cold night in January, and the fire burned blue as if there was frost in the air, and now and then the cutting north wind made a little roaring sound in the wide chimney.

In spite of her wonderful frock, and the luxury of the room around her, there was something pathetically lonely about Marna Paget as she knelt there—something surprisingly girlish, too, that fully justified her husband's stout declaration that he did not believe she was a day more than twenty.

She almost looked as if life and its great emotions and experiences had passed her by, leaving her untouched, and yet she had been married to George Paget for more than ten years, and for nearly as long she had loved another man with her whole heart, loved him hopelessly, and with the full knowledge that the future could hold nothing better for her. And for five years she had not seen him, had not even heard from him, and yet he was as much in her thoughts to-day as he had been when they were last together, although sometimes looking back it seemed as if it was only in a dream that Hugh Hubbard had held her in his arms and kissed her, only in a dream that she had been utterly happy and contented because he was near.

During the intervening years she had gone on living because life had forced its acceptance upon her, and because George Paget loved her and believed in her, and because there was the Little Flapper to consider. Only Marna knew how much Biddy

Saunders had meant to her during the past five years, and how deep and sincere was the affection between them.

And in spite of the discrepancy in their ages, their relationship was more like that of sisters than anything else, although in her loving, innocent way, Biddy was sometimes almost painfully conscious of a barrier that kept her outside Marna's complete confidence. She felt that there was a part of Marna's life which she lived absolutely alone—a part which even George Paget was not allowed to share. Biddy believed that Marna and her husband were completely happy and satisfied with one another. When Dolly Benson sometimes spoke in her ultra modern fashion of the failure of marriage, Biddy was hotly indignant.

"You talk rubbish!" she declared stoutly. "Look at Marna and George!"

Dolly Benson raised her brows.

"Well *look* at them!" she said meaningly. And there followed an eloquent pause, the meaning of which the Little Flapper had been afraid to inquire into. In a way she was fond of Dolly Benson, but she found her very advanced ideas of life and the world difficult to understand, and rather terrifying.

Biddy's confused tragic memory of Hugh Hubbard had faded with the years, although sometimes she looked at his photograph, which stood amongst many others on the mantelshelf in Marna's own sitting-room, and was conscious of a vague disquiet and foreboding. Would he ever come back, and if he did, what difference would it make to Marna's life, and therefore to the lives of them all?

Once she plucked up sufficient courage to ask Marna about him as they sat together by the fire in Marna's sitting-room.

"Where is he now, darling?" she asked, pointing to Hubbard's photograph.

"I don't know. Still in China, I suppose."

The Little Flapper knit her brows anxiously. She had a curious feeling about Hubbard's photograph, because whenever Marna was present it seemed to the Little Flapper that his eyes, which, in the ordinary way, looked straight out into the room, followed her about which ever way she moved.

"As if they were *real* eyes," Biddy often thought nervously.

"Won't he ever come home again, darling?" she asked after a moment.

"I don't know."

That was all, and the Little Flapper never guessed what rough hands her gentle inquiry had lain on Marna's heart, tearing open afresh the wounds which time could do but little to heal.

And yet Marna was apparently always bright and happy, always willing to entertain and be entertained. But there had been one tragic moment during the five years since Hubbard went away which the Little Flapper tried hard not to remember, and which she yet found it impossible to forget: a night near Christmas time, when, with the house full of people the Little Flapper suddenly missed Marna, and when she hurried in search of her, to see if there was anything she wanted done (for Biddy was never too occupied with her own enjoyment to consider Marna first), she found her standing by the window in her

bedroom looking out into the dark night, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Darling!" There was real terror in the Little Flapper's voice as she rushed across to her.

"Oh, what is it? What is it?"

For she had never seen Marna cry before, had never believed so much tragedy could be written on that beloved face.

Marna made a pitifully desperate effort to recover her self-control.

"There's nothing the matter. I'm just tired—just tired out! Don't tell anyone, Biddy. Promise me! Promise me!" she sobbed wildly.

"Of course I won't if you don't want me to." Biddy was crying herself. "But if you're so tired——"

Marna laid her head down on the girl's shoulder and for a moment held her tightly.

"It's not my body that's tired," she whispered. "It's just me. Just my heart and my thoughts."

The Little Flapper had not understood what she meant—the only kind of tiredness she herself had ever experienced was a delicious sense of fatigue after a game of tennis or after a late dance, when the bed often tugged at her soft limbs in the morning and would not allow her to get up without a supreme effort.

But she realized that to be tired in one's heart and in one's thoughts must be something very different—something from which perhaps only grown-up people suffered.

It would almost have broken her heart had she known that all through those five years Marna's life

had been milestoned by just such tragic moments, when her brave pretence of happiness and gaiety failed her as completely as a light fails when its battery is run down and there is no one at hand capable of recharging it.

Terrible moments they were when the sound of her husband's steps, or of his voice calling to her, made her shudder and long to run away and hide where he could never again find her.

Terrible moments when her last shred of self-control and almost of sanity seemed to tremble on the brink, and she felt that nothing on earth could stop her from leaving everything and joining her life with that of the man she loved.

So many times she had written to him—letters of abandoned misery and passionate pleading—only to destroy them, realizing their pathetic futility.

How did she know that he still loved her? With that whip she often tried to scourge herself to greater indifference and courage.

And yet by the strength of her own love, she knew very well the strength of his.

She knew that although for five years no word had passed between them, their love was still as deep and unchanged as it had always been. Hugh Hubbard had been meant for her from the beginning of all things, even as she had been meant for him.

Then why had they been allowed to miss one another by such a few short weeks? Sometimes it seemed to Marna that the Creator of the world must be a cruel devil who put love into the hearts of men and women, and then denied them its fulfilment—

a laughing satyr who led his victims to the very edge of happiness only to snatch it away when it was within their grasp.

Why? Why? Marna bruised herself in vain against the unanswerable riddle of life, only to struggle once more wearily back to the unsatisfying road on to which Fate had set her feet, trying with all her strength to find happiness and never succeeding.

Hope was the bellows with which she blew at the dying fire of her courage, and so managed to keep it from being utterly extinguished. At heart Marna Paget was a brave woman although probably she was unaware of the fact. She had passed an unhappy youth with a nagging, fault-finding mother whose intolerable temper turned life into hell for everyone around her. To escape from it all Marna had gone out as a nursery governess for the princely wage of ten shillings a week and her keep, and it was while she was trying to drive discipline and rudimentary knowledge into the heads of two impudent schoolgirls very little younger than herself, she met George Paget.

"Only a fool would refuse him," so Marna's mother had declared when she first heard of his unashamed devotion to her daughter. "Marry him if you've got any sense—which I doubt!"

So Marna married him, believing that by so doing she was securing happiness and comfort for the rest of her life—and then when she had been married barely three months she met Hugh Hubbard.

From that moment she felt a different creature. It was as if someone had touched her with a fairy

wand, transforming her drab everyday garments into a silver gown.

When Hubbard was with her she was always supremely and completely happy. Sometimes she looked at him and then at her husband and wondered what it was that the one man possessed and the other lacked.

At first sight George Paget was the more attractive of the two, and yet while the touch of his hand left her cold and unresponsive, the touch of Hubbard's hand set every nerve vibrating in her body.

"Are we being very kind to one another, I wonder, or very unkind?" Hubbard asked her once, when they had spent an entirely uneventful but supremely happy afternoon together riding round London on an omnibus.

Marna shook her head.

"Kind—at least that is what I think now," she said.

"And when I have gone, what will you think then?" he asked.

And she had found no words with which to answer him. While they were together it had been so easy not to look too far ahead; so easy to blind one's eyes and stifle the thought of the coming parting.

They never spoke of the future, perhaps realizing that together there could be none for them. They never spoke of George Paget, but there was the shared knowledge in their hearts that because of him they could never take the irrevocable step. He was such a fine man, such a sportsman, and he trusted them both so utterly.



"Why couldn't I have loved him as I love Hugh," Marna asked herself hopelessly, as she knelt by her bedroom fire on the night of the Little Flapper's eighteenth birthday and looked back, as she was always looking back—to the days of her short-lived happiness.

George Paget had done so much for her, had loved her so well and so faithfully, and yet it all counted as nothing when it was put into the scales against one look from Hubbard's steady eyes.

"And I have lived for five years without seeing him even once," she thought wonderingly. "And I have managed to get along somehow, and I haven't broken my heart or even got very thin or old looking. It's only myself, only my heart and mind that really know what these five years have been."

The Little Flapper had helped. Without her love Marna often believed she would have died.

But the Little Flapper never failed her.

She was never too tired or too occupied with her own affairs to respond at once to Marna's slightest wish.

"I wonder where I should have been if it hadn't been for you," she said once, dreamily, and Marna answered promptly:

"Oh, there are lots of kind people in the world who would have taken pity on a Little Flapper like you."

Biddy Saunders shook her head.

"There could never have been anyone so wonderful as you," she declared fondly, then she was silent for a moment before she said again: "It's

like a bad dream—all that part of my life before you came. The theatre and the awful men and women——”

“Don’t think of it,” Marna said quickly. “It doesn’t do to look back into the past.”

The Little Flapper turned round—she was sitting hunched up on a stool at Marna’s feet—and looked up at her with interested eyes.

“It’s funny you should say that,” she said with a little laugh. “Dolly Benson says that sometimes there is an expression in your eyes as if you are looking back into the past—a long, long way back——”

Marna coloured faintly.

“Dolly Benson is too imaginative,” she said, but she knew it was the truth, for often and often in the midst of some gaiety, or when she was with her husband, listening to his good-humoured, disconnected talk, her thoughts would suddenly slip back, as if someone had pushed them down from the top of the hill to which she had so painfully dragged them, and in an aching imagination she was again with Hugh Hubbard, listening to his voice—remembering every word he had ever said to her, reliving for a moment that wonderful sense of completeness and contentment.

“It was too wonderful to last—too wonderful,” she told herself passionately as she knelt by the fire holding her hands to its warmth, and she wondered if Hugh felt that too. Hubbard was a strong man and a patient man. He had been able to bring quiet philosophy to bear upon his trouble and to deaden his pain by work. Marna knew that and

was glad to know it, even while sometimes it hurt her to think perhaps he was less unhappy than she was.

"He's got his work and his freedom, and I'm tied, and I've got nothing, nothing," Marna often told herself hopelessly. "I'm just useless. All I can do is to think and remember—and love Biddy."

For she always came back to that thought with a sense of gratitude. She had Biddy to love and to love her in return.

Presently she roused herself with a sigh and rose to her feet, crossing again to the long mirror and regarding her slender reflection with serious eyes.

It was eternally in Marna's thoughts that she must always look her best in case one day Hugh Hubbard unexpectedly came home. Although it was so long since she had seen him, in imagination she lived her life for him and as closely to him as possible. When the sun shone she wondered if he, too, was in the sunshine—when she looked up at the moon she told herself that somewhere the same moon also looked down upon him. If she chose a new frock she found herself wondering if it was what he would like, and she had hesitated for a long time about cutting off her hair in case it would not meet with his approval when he came home. *When* he came home? A hope now so long deferred that sometimes she did not believe she would ever see him again, and then at other times she was so conscious of his nearness it would not have surprised her to know he was already in London.

Would he think she had changed very much?

Her eyes asked a wistful question of the mirror.

"Perhaps not very much," she told herself hopefully. "But you don't look twenty any more, or anything near it."

She sighed and then turned with a guilty little start as the door opened and George Paget came in.

He was immaculately dressed and he wore his monocle on the wide black silk ribbon which still always so intrigued the Little Flapper.

"You look like a duke," she invariably told him on such occasions, a statement which made George Paget square his already square shoulders and throw out his chest with pride.

"If you think you look like a duke's daughter, you're mistaken, don't cher know?" was his invariable answer.

There was a great affection between the Little Flapper and George Paget, because they also met upon the mutual plane of their love for Marna, even as the implacable Harnigan and the Little Flapper met.

"'Pon my word, Marna," Paget said now, regarding his wife with delighted eyes, "you get more abominably conceited every day. Why need you stand and admire yourself when I can do all the admiring that's good for you?"

Marna laughed and sighed together.

"I wasn't admiring myself. I was thinking how middle-aged I'm getting."

"*Middle-aged!*" Paget was indignant. "*Middle-aged! Rot!* What about me then?" he demanded loudly. He came close up behind her so that they were both reflected in the long mirror. "Make a good-lookin' pair, don't we?" he submitted modestly.

"I've put on flesh a bit during the past five years I admit, but I don't know that it's exactly unbecoming. What d'ye think?"

"I think you're the handsomest man I have ever known," Marna said, but she spoke absently, and when he would have put an arm round her she avoided him and moved swiftly away. "We ought to go down. People will soon be arriving."

"Suppose we ought," Paget agreed, but he lingered for another moment to settle his already immaculate tie before he followed his wife from the room. He was not a vain man, but for Marna's sake he was always most particular and fastidious about his appearance.

"Wonder if Hubbard's put on as much weight as I have," he said irrelevantly as they descended the stairs.

Marna stood still, a step below her husband, her hand gripping the baluster-rail very tightly, her lips suddenly pale.

"Why—whatever made you think of him?" she asked breathlessly.

George Paget laughed rather guiltily.

"Oh, nothing! Remember him here at another dance we gave, that's all. How many years ago, Marna?"

"Nearly six."

"Suppose it is." Paget cast another glance at himself in a mirror in the hall below. "Time flies, when you're as happy as we are, doesn't it, Marna?"

Marna did not answer. She looked rather pale still, and there was something pathetic in her eyes as she stopped silently in the doorway of the big drawing-

room which had been turned out and transformed into a bower of flowers with cunningly-hidden lights.

It had given her such pleasure to see that in its own way everything should be as perfect as possible for the Little Flapper, and now just the mention of Hugh Hubbard's name had altered everything and brought back the unlifting shadow which for a little while she had managed to expel. Passionate bitterness and resentment rose in her heart because he was not here with her. What had they done that they should be punished so endlessly? Why was she never to be allowed the happiness for which she craved?

The Little Flapper danced up to her all eagerness and excitement, but her smiles faded when she saw the shadow on Marna's face.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked anxiously.

Marna smiled rather constrainedly.

"Nothing. Why should there be? Biddy, don't you think the room looks wonderful?"

"Wonderful!" But Biddy spoke half-heartedly, and she kept glancing at Marna with puzzled eyes. Her beloved could change so quickly from radiant happiness to sadness—so quickly that Biddy's simple mind could neither follow nor understand its rapid transformation.

George Paget joined them as they stood together.

"Well, you two children," he said fondly; he put an arm round each of them. "Are you looking forward to your party?" he grinned down through his monocle, first at Marna and then at the Little Flapper.

"Splendid thought of ours, adopting Biddy, don't

cher know," he said happily, as usual quite forgetting that it had been entirely Marna's idea, and then as she did not answer he let his monocle fall with a little agitated click against a waistcoat button and asked: "What are you thinking about? Give you a penny for your thoughts, Marna."

"They're not worth so much," Marna answered. She gently disengaged herself and moved away.

George Paget looked hurt.

"Anything the matter, Biddy?" he asked anxiously.

Biddy shook her head.

"I don't think so. Perhaps she's worried about the party. I know she's dreadfully anxious for it to be a success."

"Everything Marna does is always a success," George answered proudly.

"I know," Biddy agreed. "But she worries all the same."

Marna's husband smiled suddenly and pressed the Little Flapper's arm.

"I've got a surprise for her," he said mysteriously. Biddy looked up.

"Not *another* diamond ring!" she questioned in dismay. "She can't wear half those she's got now."

Paget chuckled.

"No, not diamonds at all this time"—he kept his secret like a mischievous schoolboy for yet another moment, then he bent down to the Little Flapper and told her: "Hugh Hubbard's in London and he's coming to the dance to-night," and then, seeing the blank look in her eyes, he added: "You remember Hugh Hubbard, don't you?"

"Hugh Hubbard." Sudden remembrance illuminated Biddy's face and she caught her breath. "Why, of course I do! He went to China, didn't he? Why, of course I remember him. The night I looked over the balusters, just after I came to you——"

She broke off, flushing at the poignant reawakened memories.

So much had happened since that night when, trembling with excitement, she had watched the crowd in the hall below. The years since then had been so happy, that many of the incidents which had puzzled and so inexplicably hurt her, had been pushed into the background and almost forgotten until now, when George Paget's unexpected mention of Hubbard's name had opened the closed door of memory in the Little Flapper's brain and showed her once again the picture of Marna in her blue frock with its frilly skirt; of Marna's graceful, downbent head close to Hubbard's broad shoulder as if she were either very tired or very sad, and of Hubbard's steady eyes hard with resentful pain, carefully avoiding looking at her. Then out of the past she heard again the sound of Marna's voice:

"You are not very polite. You might at least pretend to be sorry to leave—us—all."

"There is no need for me to pretend." And then Marna again:

"So it's all over, Hugh—all over! Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it."

"... Marna, for God's sake! Don't you think I'm suffering too?"

It was as if someone had drawn back a shutter from



the past, bidding the Little Flapper look into it once again and see things in a clearer, more understanding light than she had seen them five years ago.

Marna and Hugh Hubbard had loved one another—always she had vaguely known and tried to ignore it, but now the truth forced itself back upon her with almost stunning force.

Marna loved a man who was not dear George Paget ! Marna loved a man who had gone away and left her alone for five long years. The Little Flapper felt as if someone had turned the sane, solid earth over beneath her feet, leaving her breathlessly and helplessly trying to steady and readjust it.

Of course she had read of such situations in books, but it had never seriously occurred to her that sometimes such things also happened in real life ; she had certainly never dreamed that anything so tragic could possibly touch her beloved Marna.

Hardly knowing what she was doing, the Little Flapper turned and walked away. Her thoughts were in a whirl, and her heart was beating with nameless apprehension.

Was this what Marna had meant when she said that there were things in life which no amount of money could buy ? Things which not all the wealth in the world could give to one for one's own, even for a moment ? Hugh Hubbard had not been home for five long years ! Did people love one another faithfully for so long without once meeting ?

Five years seemed an eternity to the Little Flapper. She told herself passionately that even if Marna had cared for Hubbard then, she could care no longer—surely time changed and cured everything ?

George Paget had followed her down the long room and spoke again anxiously.

"Don't tell Marna about Hubbard. It's to be a surprise for her—she always liked him—they always got on well together. I want to give her a surprise, don't cher know!"

The Little Flapper turned. She was quite pale and her eyes held something of their old, scared look.

"Is he really coming?" she asked painfully.

Paget let his monocle fall—he always did when he was agitated.

"Course he is!" he protested indignantly. "D'you think I'm jokin', Biddy? Here"—he seemed suddenly to become aware of her agitation—"what the deuce does it matter to you?" he demanded blankly. "You look quite upset, and the fellow's old enough to be your father."

"I know"—Biddy tried to laugh—"I know he is. But I shall be pleased to see him again. I liked him very much," she declared with an effort.

Paget roared with laughter.

"Liked him very much! Pooh, you were a baby when he was home. I don't believe you can remember what he looks like."

The colour rushed to the Little Flapper's cheeks.

"I do, of course I do!" she protested. "He's tall and he's got dark hair, and ever such a nice smile! How could I forget him when his photograph has always been on the mantelshelf in Marna's sitting-room."

Marna's husband laughed and pinched her soft cheek.

"Well, don't lose your heart to him," he said

playfully. "Hugh Hubbard's a confirmed bachelor, besides being twenty years too old for you. Yes, he's coming all right, but mind you don't tell Marna. I want to surprise her, don't cher know!"

He left her hurriedly as the first guests arrived, and the Little Flapper stood looking after him with a pale face and trembling heart.

"Marna ought to be told. She ought to be told," she whispered to herself passionately, but she knew that she had not the courage to tell her.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter IV*

HUGH HUBBARD arrived late. The dancing had been in full swing for nearly two hours before he came. The Little Flapper had been up to her room to powder her nose and was running down the big staircase when the front door was opened to admit him.

A man-servant was taking his suit-case, and hat and coat.

"He's going to stay," was Biddy's first panic-stricken thought, and her heart gave a sudden leap of fear.

If Marna still felt as instinct told the Little Flapper she must have felt all those years ago, how could she bear to have him staying in the house?

Hubbard was in evening dress, and Bidly heard him tell the servant that he had changed at his hotel.

"Very good, sir. I will find Mr. Paget."

"Don't trouble. We shall meet directly."

Bidly came soberly down the remaining stairs and walked towards him. She supposed he could not be expected to remember her, but as soon as their eyes met she knew he had done so.

"Why, it's the Little Flapper," he said, for from the very beginning everyone had adopted George Paget's nickname for Bidly.

"Yes." She flushed as she laid her hand in his. "And you haven't altered a bit," she said with a warm sense of gladness.

"Nor you!" he laughed. "And yet it's five years since I went away."

"It seems *ages*," the Little Flapper said.

The noisy band had stopped, and people were streaming out into the hall as they had done that memorable night five years ago.

The Little Flapper looked hurriedly round. She wanted to warn Marna that Hugh Hubbard had arrived—she could not bear the thought of her coming unexpectedly face to face with him, or the thought that perhaps prying eyes might witness her sudden shock—perhaps her supreme happiness. She wanted to run to her and tell her too that Hubbard had not altered at all, not one tiny little bit—that he had just the same smile and the same steadfast look in his eyes.

"I'll go and find Marna——" she began, then broke off with a little stifled exclamation as she heard

Marna's laugh and then her voice. The Little Flapper took a frightened step towards Hubbard, laying her hand on his arm.

"Oh, she doesn't know you're coming," she whispered tremulously. "Oh, if you could just wait a moment while I tell her——"

But it was too late. Marna had already seen them.

Her face was quite colourless, even to her lips, but in her eyes was such a look of blind joy that the Little Flapper caught her breath on a strangled sob as Marna went straight to Hugh Hubbard and held out her hand.

"I heard your voice," she said, and then again as if she could hardly believe the truth of her own words, "I heard your voice."

The Little Flapper turned away. She felt it would be wickedness to stand there and watch that meeting, although the hall was crowded with people—but then, Biddy told herself, the others did not know what she knew.

There was nothing in Hubbard's quiet greeting to mark it as anything unusual.

He just touched Marna's hand and let it go, turning at once to greet her husband who had followed her.

"Sorry to be so late! I got detained. Well, it's good to see you both again."

Paget's hearty laugh rang out.

"Good to see you, too. You're lookin' fit and well. Not putting on flesh like I am though, eh? And Marna? How do you think my wife looks?"

"She hasn't altered at all."

Paget let his monocle fall and adjusted it again with a delighted chuckle.

"Just a girl still, eh?" he asked eagerly. "That's what I tell her. Doesn't look a day over twenty, does she? How do you like her with her hair shingled? Was dead against it myself at first, but 'pon my word, I think it suits her, don't cher know?" His delighted laugh rang out once more. "And the Little Flapper! Grown up, hasn't she? Here, Biddy, come and speak to Hugh."

Biddy obeyed reluctantly.

"I have spoken to him," she said shyly. "He knew me at once and I knew him."

She looked quickly at Marna and away again. At that moment it was quite true what George Paget had said. Marna didn't look a day over twenty—she was just a girl again. And it was because Hugh Hubbard was there.

The Little Flapper knew it, and was afraid. In books happiness never seemed to come from such tragic situations.

Marna was married and she could therefore never be anything to Hubbard, and yet if she loved him and could look so utterly different just because he was with her, how could she ever be happy without him?

"Perhaps she doesn't really like him any more," Biddy told herself hopelessly, and tried hard to believe it.

After all, five years was a long time, and besides she was married to George Paget, and George was such a dear.

The Little Flapper's eyes filled with tears as she

looked at him and realized more acutely than ever before how much a dear he really was. He deserved every happiness, he was so good to all the world.

Then she looked at Hugh Hubbard, and her heart contracted with apprehension. "Why has he come home? Oh, why *has* he?" she asked herself desperately.

George Paget was holding Hubbard affectionately by the arm, laughing and talking like a delighted schoolboy.

"I didn't tell Marna you were home. Wanted to surprise her. She's been a bit down in the dumps lately. Shall look to you to cheer her up. She must get a bit tired of me hangin' round her all the time, don't cher know! I believe she's more pleased to see you than I am, you old boulder you! Marna—why, *Marna!*"

He had turned smilingly to his wife, then suddenly his cheery voice broke off in a sharp cry, as without a word or a sign Marna suddenly swayed like a flower which is ruthlessly cut from its stem and fell at his feet.

Hubbard was on his knees beside her in a flash. He raised her head gently against his arm, he laid a hand above her heart.

"It's all right—she's only fainted. Move back!" He raised angry eyes to the people crowding around them. "Move back, I say! It's the heat of the room, that's all. It's stifling."

He looked at Biddy, white-faced and terror-stricken, clinging to Marna's hand sobbing tearlessly.

“ Oh, darling—darling——”

And then up at George Paget standing like a stricken boy, his monocle dangling, his mouth half open in terror, stammering: “ Hugh—Hugh—for God’s sake——” Strange how they both seemed to depend on him.

Hubbard lifted Marna in his arms. He pushed his way through the crowd of scared people and crossed the hall to Marna’s own little sitting-room, kicking open the closed door with an impatient foot.

He laid her down gently on the couch by the fire and someone brought water, someone else brought brandy. An elderly woman with kind eyes and an unfashionable—frock knelt down by Marna and bathed her face with Hugh Hubbard’s handkerchief dipped in the water. Presently Marna stirred faintly and a touch of colour came into her white lips.

The elderly woman looked up at George Paget.

“ She’s all right,” she said briskly. “ My good man, don’t stand there staring! Go and tell the band to start again. Have you never seen a woman faint before? ”

George Paget adjusted his monocle with a shaking hand.

“ Sure she’s all right? ” he asked hoarsely. “ Sure it’s nothing serious! Never known her do such a thing before. Do you think it was my fault—do you think it was too much of a surprise for her?—about Hugh, I mean, don’t cher know? ”

Mrs. Blair smiled at him as she might have smiled at a mischievous boy who has broken a window and who fears a thrashing.



"Nonsense! It's no one's fault," she declared. "Run away. She'll be all right in a minute. Well enough to go on dancing, I expect." She looked at the weeping Biddy. "And you go with him," she ordered, but the Little Flapper would not move.

"I'm going to stay. I love her and she'll want me." Unconsciously she raised her tear-drowned eyes to Hugh Hubbard. "Let me stay," she implored, as if he rather than Marna's husband had the right to deny or to give permission.

Hubbard took George Paget by the arm.

"Come along, old chap, Marna's all right."

The two men went away together, shutting the door behind them, and presently in the distance Biddy heard the band starting again.

Marna had raised herself on one arm and was looking at Biddy with apologetic eyes.

"I'm so sorry. Did I frighten you? It was silly of me. I've never done such a thing before. No, please, no more brandy."

She pushed away the glass which Mrs. Blair held to her lips.

"I'm quite all right, really. I'm so sorry. Were people very upset?"

Mrs. Blair shook her head.

"They've started dancing again. I told George you'd be able to join them directly." She rose to her feet, her stout, unfashionable figure towering above Marna. "Do you *really* feel all right?" she asked with a subtle change of tone.

"Quite all right." Marna rose to her feet. She still felt a little weak and unsteady. "Don't you

wait, Mrs. Blair," she begged. "Biddy will stay with me, and I'll come in a minute."

Mrs. Blair hesitated. Her lips moved as if to say something, then she shrugged her stout shoulders and turned to the door.

"You young people all live too hard nowadays," she said bluntly. "No wonder the least thing makes you faint."

When she had gone Marna went over to the fire, one shaking hand clutching the edge of the mantelpiece to steady herself.

Biddy followed, and put an arm round her.

"Are you sure you are all right, darling?" she whispered. "You frightened me so."

"Quite all right. It was only the heat of the room. It came on so suddenly. I was feeling ever so well, and then all at once—everything seemed to go."

She looked at Hugh Hubbard's photograph which stood on the mantelshelf on a level with her eyes, and suddenly she gripped the Little Flapper's hand hard and whispered:

"It is true, Biddy, isn't it? He has really come home, hasn't he? I didn't just dream it, did I?"

The Little Flapper flushed scarlet and looked away, tears rushing to her eyes.

"No, darling, he really has come home," she answered gently.

And she wondered why it was that she felt suddenly very wise and grown-up—and not quite like a Little Flapper any more. But she was young, and as the night wore on and Marna seemed perfectly recovered, Biddy grew happier again.

Marna did not even dance with Hugh Hubbard. She introduced him to all the prettiest girls in the room and seemed quite calm and self-possessed. George Paget followed at her heels like a troubled, faithful dog, asking every few minutes if she was quite sure she was all right.

"I wanted to send for a doctor," he said to the Little Flapper anxiously, "but Marna hates doctors. Do you think she looks all right? Don't you think she's very pale?"

"I don't think we need worry," the Little Flapper answered hopefully. "After all, some women are always fainting, aren't they?"

"Marna's never fainted before in her life," George Paget declared. "She's run down, that's what it is. She wants a change. I'll take her to the South of France again. It did her a lot of good before when she was seedy."

"Yes, I should. She'd like that," Biddy agreed, but she knew that nothing would induce Marna to leave London while Hugh Hubbard was there.

Marna came up to them. She was smiling happily enough, but there was a terrible look of nervous strain in her eyes.

"Enjoying it, Biddy dear?" she asked.

"I think it's perfect," Biddy answered.

Marna smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I think so too," she said, and looked across the room to where Hugh Hubbard stood.

It may have been an unintentional glance, but the Little Flapper's heart contracted.

"Why *has* he come home? Why *has* he?" she asked herself again in distress.

Presently Hubbard asked Biddy to dance.

"I'm not much of a dancer," he apologized, "but I'll do my best if you think you can put up with me."

It was all nonsense, of course, as the Little Flapper discovered, for he danced divinely, and she loved the strong feel of his arm around her little body and the careful way in which he guided her through the crowded room.

He was so kindly attentive. He listened to her simple chatter with so much interest.

In spite of her shorn locks and fashionably abbreviated skirts, the Little Flapper had not the modern sang-froid of Dolly Benson and her friends. She still knew the discomfort of occasional shyness, and the painful doubt that she might not always be saying or doing the correct thing.

But with Hubbard she was quite at her ease, and she laughed and chattered away to him happily enough of her own small affairs and interests.

Amongst other things she presently told him how she adored Marna.

"She's such a darling. I don't know what I should do without her. I was terrified this evening when she fainted," she shivered in his arms "I thought she was dead. Oh, what should I do without her?"

Hubbard did not answer, and looking up, afraid lest her chatter was wearying him, Biddy was struck by the deep sadness of his eyes. And she remembered that for more than five years *he* had done without Marna, and would have to again. Impulsively she dashed off to another subject.

"When are you going away again, Mr. Hubbard?"

That hardly seemed the right thing to ask either, seeing that he had only just come home, but Hubbard answered at once.

"I am only over for a few weeks on business."

"And then you will go back again?"

"I must."

"Why must you?" the Little Flapper asked, true to her policy of trying to get to the bottom of every question, and Hubbard answered:

"Because my work is out there, and there is nothing for me in England."

An ordinary enough reason, but in the light of the Little Flapper's understanding it seemed fraught with a deep significance and sadness, and once again back came the memory of herself as a child of twelve, clinging to the polished baluster-rail and looking down on this man and Marna talking together:

"... Don't you think I am suffering too?"

The Little Flapper raised her eyes kindly to Hubbard's face and the thought came into her mind that it must be a very wonderful thing to be loved by this man—it must mean something so much greater and more profound than the almost boyish adoration which George Paget gave to his wife—something that would last for ever and ever—something which as Marna herself had said only that evening, all the wealth in the world could not give to one for one's own, even for a moment.

"A penny for your thoughts, Biddy," Hugh

Hubbard said lightly, and the Little Flapper roused herself with a start to answer :

" I was thinking of something Marna said this evening."

" What did she say? "

The dance was over now, and together they walked out into the hall and found seats on a big couch in a corner.

The Little Flapper clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back against the cushions with a sigh.

" She said there are such heaps of things in the world that money cannot buy."

" Did she? What sort of things? "

" I think she meant happiness."

Hubbard made no comment. He sat leaning a little forward, his hands clasped loosely between his knees, his eyes fixed on the floor.

Biddy looked at him with sorrowful eyes. When they first met that evening she had thought him unchanged, but now she could see that there was much grey in his close-cut hair, and many lines about his eyes.

" He doesn't look happy," she thought, and felt almost glad.

If Marna was to be unhappy, it was only fair that this man should be unhappy too.

Dolly Benson came flying up to them, her eyes bright and eager.

" I suppose you don't remember me, Mr. Hubbard? I used to go to school with Biddy, years ago when you were home. Mr. Paget always called me the Big Flapper."

Hubbard rose to his feet, a polite lie on his lips.

"Of course I remember you. You haven't changed at all—except that you're so grown up. I feel afraid of you."

Later, when Hubbard had gone to find another partner, Dolly Benson flung herself upon the Little Flapper.

"Isn't he too divine?" she demanded with her usual extravagance. "Quite the most striking-looking man in the room. Fancy him remembering me? I always adored him years ago—you remember how I always adored him, don't you, Biddy? Oh, I do *hope* he will ask me to dance."

[The Little Flapper looked rather scornful. She was accustomed to Dolly's sudden violent fancies and never took her outbursts very seriously.

"I thought John Blair was the only pebble on your beach," she said unkindly.

[The Big Flapper hunched her white shoulders.

"I've done with him," she announced calmly. "He took that hateful Hall girl to Ciro's last night, and if he thinks I'm going to dance with him after that, just because she isn't here, he's made the mistake of his young life. I'll make him eat out of my hand before I've done with him." She flung a half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace. "And that's where I'd like to fling him as well," she added viciously. She took a lipstick and mirror from a tiny vanity-bag and retouched her lips.

"Where's my darling Mr. Hubbard now?" she asked rapturously, when her toilet was completed. "Oh, there he is, talking to Marna. My dear! did

you ever see such unashamed happiness on any woman's face? "

The Little Flapper's heart gave a sudden throb as her eyes followed the direction of Dolly's eager glance.

Hubbard and Marna were standing together talking and smiling like ordinary people, and yet there was something so different about them—something that seemed to radiate contentment and perfect happiness.

"If I had not known the truth before, I should know now," Biddy Saunders told herself in panic, and she wondered how long it would be before George Paget's kindly, unsuspecting eyes were also opened to the truth. But she scowled at Dolly Benson.

"And why *shouldn't* Marna look happy?" she demanded crossly. "She's always trying to make other people happy."

"My sainted aunt!" the Big Flapper ejaculated blankly. "Anyone would think I was running Marna down. I merely said I never saw such unashamed happiness in any woman's face." She paused, and a twinkle grew in her eyes. "I never even suggested a reason for it," she said wickedly. "Not that I couldn't if I chose——" [Then seeing Biddy's growing wrath she relented. "There! I'm only teasing," she declared. "It's fun teasing you. And now tell me is Mr. Hubbard going to stay in the house? "

"Yes, I think so," Biddy admitted reluctantly.

The Big Flapper gave an ecstatic sigh.

"How heavenly! I'm so thankful Marna asked me to stay for a few days, too."

Biddy screwed up her little nose scornfully.



"You don't imagine Mr. Hubbard will ever take any notice of you, *do you?*" she demanded.

The Big Flapper sighed and stuck out long slender legs, regarding her silk stockings and daintily buckled shoes with pride.

"Well, there's no harm in hoping," she said sententiously. "And anyway, nobody can prevent me adoring him from afar." She sighed again. "He's the sort of man I've always dreamed about—the sort of man you could go to if you were in any trouble or if you were unhappy, and be quite sure that he would understand and put things right for you," she said sentimentally.

"Any nice man would do that," Biddy declared positively, and thought of George Paget who never turned a deaf ear to a tale of distress.

"Oh, would they!" the Big Flapper scoffed. "You ought to hear what my old man says when things go wrong and the mater is silly enough to go to him about it. I often wonder how it is she hasn't learnt better after all these years. Of course, in his way, he's quite a kind old bean, but you might as well go to that"—she kicked the leg of the couch—"as to go to father for help or comfort." She sat up with renewed enthusiasm. "Hugh Hubbard's quite different. He has that sort of look in his eyes—I suppose you haven't noticed it—but it's the sort of look that seems to put protecting arms around you, if you can understand!"

Biddy looked profoundly amazed. She had always considered Dolly Benson rather shallow and superficial, and she found this sudden plumbing of unsuspected depths very perplexing.

"You certainly sound as if you rather adore him," she said resentfully.

The Big Flapper sighed.

"It's no use, as I know he doesn't even approve of me," she said disconsolately. "I read it in his eyes at once—I suppose my skirts are too short, or I'm too cheeky, or something—but oh, Biddy, don't you just *love* the back of his head?"

Biddy stared.

"The back of his head!"

"Yes. Of course you haven't noticed that either. You wouldn't. But I always notice odd things like that. The back of his head is divine—such a lovely *square* look."

Biddy's eyes were angry.

"You *are* talking rubbish," she protested.

"Am I!" the Big Flapper laughed, then suddenly she sprang to her feet. "They're playing that divine fox-trot," she cried breathlessly. "Listen, Biddy!"

The band had started once more and the Big Flapper began fox-trotting gracefully up and down the corner of the wide hall, her slim body moving sensuously, her eyes half-closed.

"Isn't it divine?" she said again, and as she danced she began to sing the rather foolish and sentimental words of the song in her sweet, untrained voice.

"I'll see you in my dreams,  
Hold you in my dreams—  
Someone took you out of my arms,  
Still I feel the thrill of your charms,

Lips that once were mine,  
Tender eyes that shine,  
They will light my way to-night,  
I'll see you in my dreams."

Biddy moved restlessly, her brown eyes fixed on the Big Flapper's gracefully swaying form.

[There was a feeling of great unhappiness in her heart, of something unusual in the air which she could neither understand nor explain, but which seemed intensified by the music and by Dolly Benson's shrill untrained voice singing those sweetly sentimental words :

" I'll see you in my dreams,  
Hold you in my dreams——"

The Big Flapper broke off suddenly and made a little rush towards the ball-room.

" It's too good to waste by myself," she said breathlessly. " I shall have to go and make it up with Johnny Blair after all," and she was gone.

Biddy rose to her feet with a sigh of relief. She liked Dolly Benson as a rule, but to-night she had found her a little overpowering.

" Lips that once were mine,  
Tender eyes that shine,  
They will light my way to-night,  
I'll see you in my dreams."

[The words were echoing in the Little Flapper's mind as she crossed the hall to where George Paget stood alone, at the entrance to the ball-room. She slipped a hand through his arm, vaguely conscious that perhaps he felt as restless and apprehensive as she did.

“Where’s Marna——” she began, then stopped, as across the ball-room she saw Marna dancing at last with Hugh Hubbard.

*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter V*

IT is possible to reach a point of happiness too great for expression, too wonderful for mere words, and it seemed to Marna that she had reached that point when Hugh Hubbard put his arm round her and drew her into the throng of dancers.

It was like a dream. A dream that her hand rested once more on his shoulder, a dream that his arm enfolded her.

She looked round the crowded room with dazed eyes. They were nearly all young people present, nearly all boys and girls who had come to the Little Flapper’s birthday dance, and yet Marna felt that to-night she was younger than any of them. There could be no girl present with a heart so light and brimming over with happiness as her own—no girl with such a feeling of utter contentment and sense of every desire fulfilled. The man she loved was with her again—it was his hand which held hers, his shoulder against which her trembling fingers lay.

Once she bent her head and lightly brushed his coat with her cheek—once she looked up and for the first time that evening met the deep silent contentment of his eyes.

So many things came clamouring to her lips—she wanted to tell him how much she loved him—she wanted to say how terrible the long years had been without him—she wanted to say that she would never be able to let him go again, and yet the only words she could form were so banal, so ordinary—words to which anyone might have listened.

“They all seem to be enjoying the dance, don’t you think?”

“I am sure they are.”

“I am glad you were able to be here.”

“I am glad too.”

“Don’t you think Biddy is going to be very pretty?”

“Very pretty.”

And then without any will of her own, at last something more poignant and intimate.

“Now you are home again it does not seem possible you have been away five years.”

She felt his arm tighten around her as he answered:

“Last night if anyone had told me it was fifty years I should not have been surprised.”

The blood rushed to Marna’s face and her lips trembled. For a moment she felt almost resentful that he had disturbed her perfect contentment. It was as if he had gently touched an uncovered nerve, giving her exquisite pain. She had wanted to be left in peace for a little, she had not yet wanted to be forced out into the sea of passion which lay between them, and which she knew must some day either sweep them together from their feet or leave her to drown alone.

Hubbard felt her shiver in the clasp of his arm

as he bent his head to catch her whispered words.

"Don't, Hugh, oh, don't."

They did not speak again until the music stopped and a clamour of voices and applause broke out deafeningly, then Marna laughed and looked up into Hubbard's face.

"I don't feel a day more than seventeen to-night," she said breathlessly.

"Don't you, my dear?"

He spoke without looking at her, but the tenderness of his voice was like a kiss laid upon her lips, and for a moment she closed her eyes and her heart seemed to swoon with happiness. Then the band started again and Hubbard asked: "Shall we go on?" But Marna shook her head.

"No, I think I'm tired. Besides I mustn't be greedy. There are so many girls for you to dance with, Hugh."

Together they made their way down the long room towards the doorway where the Little Flapper stood with George Paget, and then as she met her husband's proud, smiling eyes, Marna's happiness suddenly died.

The dreadful feeling came to her that even as now Paget's broad shoulders barred the doorway of the room, so his claim upon her barred the doorway of her life that led to freedom and the one thing she desired.

Those kindly smiling eyes were the eyes of her jailer—the expensive frock she wore, her diamonds, and the luxurious house were fetters binding her to him for ever and ever.

Hardly knowing what she did, she laid her hand on Hubbard's arm, drawing him to a standstill. She knew now that her uplifted sense of perfect happiness and contentment was but a sham. It was as if she had drawn a veil over a dead face, for a little while trying to cheat herself into the belief that its eyes were only closed in sleep and would waken again.

To-night for a few hours she might pretend to be happy but there was to-morrow to be faced and all the to-morrows, and no one could tell her what they held in store, what fresh misery and loneliness and heartbreak.

"Let us dance again. I want to go on dancing with you," she said, and there was a little note of fear in her voice.

But presently when George Paget moved away from the doorway her sense of panic died down and the iron band of suffocation that had bound her heart snapped, allowing her to breathe more freely, and she looked at Hubbard with wavering apology.

"We will stop now if you like."

"Are you tired?"

"No, but I'm thirsty, and I know there is iced champagne."

"Iced champagne will keep. We will finish the dance."

The band had broken once more into the Big Flapper's favourite fox-trot and the young people had eagerly taken up the chorus.

"I'll see you in my dreams,  
Hold you in my dreams—  
Someone took you out of my arms——"

"Do you hear those words, Marna?" Hubbard asked.

"Yes." Marna stood suddenly still, her hand falling from his shoulder. "I don't want to dance any more," she said.

They went together to the supper room, which was almost deserted, and sat down at one of the many small tables.

Marna leaned back in her chair with a long sigh, and Hubbard asked again anxiously:

"Are you tired?"

She nodded.

"I believe I am, after all."

His eyes looked pathetically angry.

"You don't take enough care of yourself. You do too much."

Marna laughed and sat up, determinedly shaking aside her lethargy.

"That's unkind! Just because I was silly enough to faint, I suppose. I've never done such a thing in all my life."

"But you will do it again many times unless you take more care of yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"That you are not looking well. You're thinner than you were when I went away, and there are shadows under your eyes."

She tried to smile.

"You forget that I am five years older than I was when you went away."

Hubbard laid his hand over hers, as her fingers nervously clutched the table edge, and she winced as if he had hurt her.



"Don't, oh, don't," she said in a shaken voice, and then as he withdrew his hand she looked up at him, her eyes feverish, her cheeks pitifully flushed as she whispered, "You're not angry with me?"

"*Angry!*"

"And you do—oh, you do still love me, don't you?"

If it had cost her her life, she could not have kept back the almost inaudible question. Although in her heart there was the consciousness that the years between this moment and their last kiss, had made no difference, yet she had to hear it from his own lips.

And Hubbard answered:

"I love you as I have always loved you, and as I shall always love you."

Marna caught her breath on a little sob and took up her untouched glass of champagne.

"All my love, Hugh," she whispered with white lips.

"And mine to you, my dear," he answered.

"I've never seen Marna look better," George Paget said delightedly to Hubbard, when later on in the night the two men found themselves together. "'Pon my word if it didn't seem so damned silly I should be inclined to say that fainting had done her good, don't cher know?"

Hugh Hubbard glanced across the room to Marna and quickly away again.

"Look what a colour she's got," Paget went on delightedly. "Hark at the way she's laughin'. Does you good to hear it, eh, what?"

"Yes."

"Suppose it's nothing serious for a woman to faint," Marna's husband went on more compatibly. "Though I must admit I thought it was a bit out of fashion. Faintin' hardly seems to go with short skirts and shingled independence, eh?"

"Hardly."

Paget clapped his friend on the back.

"You haven't got much to say for yourself," he accused him heartily.

Hubbard roused himself with an effort.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten my party manners," he apologized.

"Nonsense. You ought to hear how popular you are with the flappers to-night," Paget chuckled. "My nose is quite out of joint. Little Biddy was flustered to death, bless her, when she heard you were comin' to her party."

Hubbard smiled absently, his eyes had wandered again to Marna. Her flushed cheeks and too-bright eyes did not deceive him, nor her high-pitched excited voice, and his heart ached for her and for his own impotence.

He told himself bitterly that he had been a knave and a fool to come home, and yet he knew he could not have stayed away any longer. Like Marna he had had to make sure, to hear from her own lips that she still loved him.

"You ought to find a wife to take back with you," Paget said genially. "Nothing like marriage to make you happy, don't cher know."

Hubbard laughed, not very mirthfully.

"You are judging from your own experience?" he asked.

"Of course." George Paget twirled his monocle on its wide ribbon. "I'm the luckiest dog in the world," he said, suddenly grave. "Should like to see you as happy as I am, Hugh. 'Pon my word I should."

"I am sure you would."

Paget regarded his friend with affectionate eyes.

"Lots of pretty girls in the world, yer know," he submitted boyishly.

Hubbard laughed.

"Look here," he threatened. "If you're going to start match-making, my name's Walker."

Paget laughed with him.

"I shall get Marna to take you in hand," he threatened. "Marna knows the sort of woman to make you happy—eh, what? Don't you think so?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Blair was crossing the room towards them, her long, old-fashioned skirts trailing the floor, and more to change the subject than from any real desire to know, Hubbard asked:

"Who is this lady, George?"

George stuck his monocle in his eye.

"Mrs. Blair! Jolly nice woman. Looks a bit B.C., eh? Got a son—jolly nice chap! Name of John! Comes of a good old stock. Should like to see him take a fancy to Biddy, but afraid he's already sweet on Dolly Benson——" He broke off as Mrs. Blair joined them.

She was a good-looking woman with kind, motherly eyes and a pleasant smile. Her rather stiff silk frock was almost high at the neck and above it she wore an old-fashioned dog collar of valuable

pearls. Her hair was drawn severely back from her forehead and fastened in a tight knot on top of her head. "Out of the Ark," so behind her back the Big Flapper disrespectfully described her, but to her face even the Big Flapper was always respectful. Out of the Ark in appearance Mrs. Blair might be, but her mind was as up-to-date and tolerant as the most modern woman's, and she had a heart of gold.

She looked very directly at Hugh Hubbard and laid a hand on his arm.

"Come and talk to me," she commanded. She smiled at George Paget. "An old woman's privilege," she said, and led Hugh away.

"I know we haven't been formally introduced," she told him, "but I am Mrs. Blair—that's my son across the room dancing with Biddy. I know who you are. Your name is Hugh Hubbard, and you've just come from China. Let's sit down, shall we, I want to talk to you."

Her refreshing bluntness amused Hubbard—he found her a chair and brought one up for himself.

"What do we talk about?" he asked. "And, may I smoke?"

"You may do anything you like if you will answer me one question."

"I will if I can, certainly. What is it?"

Mrs. Blair moved her long skirts aside a little to avoid the many people passing to and fro.

"Where are George Paget's eyes?" she demanded.

Hubbard turned and looked at her blankly.

"George's eyes?"

"That's what I said, yes. You've known him for a good many years, haven't you? "

"Nearly all my life."

"Well, then; where *are* his eyes that he can't see how ill his wife looks? "

Hubbard stared at her and the colour slowly left his face.

"I don't understand," he said at last with an effort.

Mrs. Blair spread her white hands deprecatingly.

"I think you do—at least I thought you did this evening when Marna fainted."

Hubbard made an inarticulate sound.

"I don't understand," he said again rather hoarsely, but Mrs. Blair went on bluntly as if he had not spoken.

"That was no ordinary faint, Mr. Hubbard—Marna's not the type to faint because a room's hot—she'd have enough sense to get out of it first into the air. She's ill, that's why she fainted. She's been ill for months—I very nearly said years—only folks are so blind they can never see beyond the end of their own nose."

She turned her kind eyes to him again.

"I thought perhaps you'd see the change in her as you've been away so long," she went on. "You're a man of sense, that's why I wanted to have a talk with you. I hoped you would be able to say something to George. He's as blind as a bat. I've no patience with him—he's nothing but a boy masquerading as a man. He'll let his wife die before he wakes up to his responsibilities."

Hubbard sat very still, staring down at the floor.

His cigarette had gone out, and he made no attempt to relight it. If any other woman had spoken to him in such a way he would have been tempted to make light of it, but he knew well enough that Mrs. Blair would not have spoken without good cause. She was not a woman to talk for the sake of talking.

"Perhaps you think I am making a fuss and interfering in things that do not concern me," she went on bluntly. "But as it happens they do concern me. I am fond of Marna, and I'm sorry for her."

"Sorry for her!" There was a note of weary irony in Hubbard's voice.

Mrs. Blair snapped him up almost rudely.

"Yes, sorry for her! I suppose you think there's no occasion for me to be sorry for her, is that it? I suppose you think like the rest of the world that she's got everything she wants, and is to be envied. Perhaps you even agree with little Biddy, and consider her the luckiest lady alive, eh?"

She gave the pearl dog-collar a little impatient twist.

"Well, if that's what you think, I've been mistaken in you, Mr. Hubbard, that's all I can say. I thought you were different to the rest—more understanding."

Hubbard sat in silent torment. How much did this woman know, or guess? he wondered. With an effort he forced himself to speak.

"If you think Mrs. Paget is ill, couldn't you—why don't you speak to Paget yourself. It would be quite natural for a friend to say something about it to him. I've been away five years. I've only just come home—it would look strange if I——"

Again Mrs. Blair cut in bluntly.

"Nonsense! you're the one to do it. If Marna does look ill you're the one who would be sure to notice it as you haven't seen her for so long." She turned her chair round a little so that she could look at him more squarely. "Can't you *see* the difference in her?" she demanded exasperatedly.

Hubbard kept his eyes fixed on the floor; he dared not raise them lest they should betray him to this kindly inquisitor.

"She's thinner, perhaps," he said at last stiltedly. "But she seems lively enough——" he broke off as Mrs. Blair interrupted for the third time.

"*Lively!* Does all that laughing and nonsense take you in for a single moment? If it does, you're not the man I took you to be. It doesn't deceive me, anyway. It's all put on, only everyone's so blind they don't understand. Everyone is so used to Marna being lively and amusing that they just take it for granted that she always will be. But I tell you she's ill, and I'm not a fool. I don't go through life wearing blinkers, if other people do."

Hugh Hubbard made another effort.

"Don't you think perhaps she's been overdoing it lately? Biddy tells me they have a pretty strenuous time getting about and so forth——"

Mrs. Blair looked faintly contemptuous.

"Getting about doesn't kill anyone young," she said flatly. "It's worry that kills. Marna's fretting, that's what it is. I've thought so for a long time, and now I'm sure of it, though what on earth she can be fretting about is beyond my comprehension. I've tried to find out, I admit. I've tried to make her talk

to me, but she won't. I'm used to confidences from all sorts of people. I'd do my best to help her, if she would let me——"

"I am sure you would."

Hubbard relit his cigarette with a hand that was not quite steady.

"Perhaps after all there really isn't anything worrying her," he said.

Mrs. Blair ignored him.

"On the face of it, she's got everything a woman can want," she continued. "Everything, that is, if money, and a fine house, and going anywhere she wishes, means 'everything.' But as I said just now, I'm sorry for Marna—I always have been. I've known her some time—three or four years, at any rate—and she always appears to me to be a lonely, unloved woman——"

Hubbard moved restlessly.

"Paget thinks the world of his wife," he said with an effort.

Mrs. Blair turned scornful eyes upon him.

"What's that got to do with it?" she demanded. "It doesn't make a woman happy because a man thinks the world of her unless she thinks the world of him too. Are you a married man, Mr. Hubbard?"

"I?—no."

"I thought not. Well, I've been married twice. I was twenty-five when I married John's father, and of course we thought we were in love. I suppose we were, if being in love means that you like being kissed and told that you're pretty—and I was pretty in those days," she added with a touch of pride.



"We got married in very much the same sort of way as young people to-day would get ready for a party. We expected it to be all sunshine and roses without any effort on our part to make it so. We soon found out our mistake—at least I did, and for fifteen years we lived together, more or less unhappily, without a taste or a thought in common—even John was a cause of dissension between us—and then his father died. I'm not a humbug, Mr. Hubbard, and so I'm not going to tell you I was broken-hearted. I wasn't, I was relieved, and I dare say he felt the same, too, poor man, when he woke up on the other side of Infinity—if there is another side! I was a widow for ten years, and then I married again——" Her voice unconsciously softened, and she glanced across the room to where a tall, thin man with short-sighted eyes and very grey hair was talking to a couple of girls. "That's my husband," she said proudly. "The finest man that ever lived. I've never had an unhappy moment since I married him. He understands me, and I understand him. I never knew what married happiness could be until he showed me. It's just the difference between going a long journey and having to hold up someone weaker and less capable than yourself all the way, and going that same journey with a strong arm to help *you* instead and a steady voice to comfort you when things go wrong." She broke off with a little laugh to ask after a moment: "I suppose you think I'm a sentimental old fool."

"No."

"And it's very much the same with Marna, or else I'm greatly mistaken," Mrs. Blair insisted.

"She's doing her journey with a load round her neck which is more than she is capable of carrying. Don't think I'm running George Paget down. He's a dear, and I love him. But I love her more, and I want to see her happy."

Hubbard looked away towards the ball-room. He wondered if Mrs. Blair had any idea what this conversation meant to him, but she went on ruthlessly :

"I never had a daughter of my own, much as I wanted one, but if I had and I could have chosen her, she would have been like Marna. She's the sweetest, most unselfish—— Here she comes."

Marna crossed the hall to them at that moment.

"I've got a partner for you, Hugh," she said gaily. She looked at Mrs. Blair. "May I take him away?" she asked.

Mrs. Blair laughed.

"Take him away by all means. You'll find him willing enough to come, I've no doubt. I'm afraid I've rather bullied the poor man."

Marna looked at Hubbard, who had risen to his feet.

"What's she been saying to you, Hugh?"

"Tell her—I hope you will," Mrs. Blair cut in bluntly, meeting his eyes, and with a little laugh she rose and left them, her voluminous skirts trailing behind her across the polished floor.

"What's she been saying to you?" Marna asked again a trifle anxiously. "She's the kindest soul really, but sometimes she's dreadfully blunt."

Hubbard ground out the stump of his cigarette in a fernpot close by.

"She's been talking about you, Marna."

"Oh! how dull. Why about me?"

"She says that you look ill."

Marna gave a little vexed exclamation.

"Ill! just because I fainted, I suppose."

"No. Mrs. Blair says you have been looking ill for some time."

"She imagines things," Marna said lightly.

"Come and be introduced to Dulcie Mayne, Hugh."

"Must I?"

"I think it would please her. She's not very pretty, and she hasn't had many dances this evening I'm afraid."

She touched his arm.

"She's over there at the end of the hall. She's so shy, poor girl! I found her hiding in a dark corner."

But when they came to the dimly-lit alcove it was empty.

Hugh laughed.

"Evidently she could not face even me," he said dryly. "And I can't pretend to be sorry. Where are you going, Marna?" for she had turned away.

"I have so much to see to. Do you forget that I am the hostess?"

"They are all dancing."

"I know, but——" She broke off and stood looking away from him, nervously twisting her fingers together.

There was a little silence, then Hugh asked a hoarse question.

"Have you been very unhappy, Marna?"

He saw her lips move, but no sound came from them, and she shook her head dumbly.

Hubbard looked at her, his eyes dark with passionate regret.

"Are you sorry I came home?"

"No, oh no."

He took the slim hand nearest to him and held it hard for a moment.

"My dear, if there is anything in the world I can do for you—to make you happier——"

She raised her eyes, heavy with unshed tears.

"There isn't anything, Hugh, you know that."

Yes, he knew it well enough—had always known it. They loved one another, but that love could bring them no happiness even if they trampled another man's heart underfoot in order to reach its fulfilment.

There was a little helpless silence, then Marna asked:

"Are you staying with us, Hugh?"

"George asked me to, and at first I refused—but he seemed so hurt—I let myself be persuaded, still if you would rather I did not, Marna——"

"Oh, no. If George asked you, of course you must stay."

"Not unless it will please you."

She looked up at him.

"Do you need to ask me that?"

"No, but I wanted to hear you say it."

Marna smiled faintly.

"We're like a couple of children playing a game of make believe, aren't we, Hugh?" she said—then suddenly her sadness vanished, and she threw back

her head and laughed excitedly. "Well, and why not? Let's make the best of the time we've got. Eat, drink and be merry; for to-morrow we die."

"If only that was the worst we have to face," Hubbard said.

Marna's face quivered, but the next moment she was laughing again.

"Don't think about it. I refuse to. You're here and that's all that matters. Come and dance——" She caught his hand excitedly, tugging at it like a child. "Let's be young and happy just for to-night. I'm going to forget there is such a thing as the future. What's the good of looking for bridges that may not be in existence. George!" she called to her husband who was carefully carrying a brimming glass of champagne across the hall for someone. "I've been bullying Hugh. I tell him he's got to be young—at any rate for to-night. What do you say?"

Paget beamed down at her.

"I've been telling him the same thing myself, more or less," he answered. "Been telling him we shall have to find him a wife—been telling him you know just the sort of woman to make him happy, eh, what?"

"Of course!" Marna answered recklessly, laughing up at Hugh Hubbard with too-bright eyes. "Something fluffy and extravagant and very young, don't you think, Hugh? Someone who will drag you out to balls and parties every night of your life——"

Her husband laughed delightedly.

"That's it," he agreed heartily. "Someone like the Little Flapper, eh?"

Marna dropped Hubbard's hand and looked away across the room at Bidy. Someone like the Little Flapper!

Of course it was ridiculous she told herself, that those words should hurt so inexpressibly.

Bidy was only a child, but at least she was free. And because it hurt her so much, she raised her voice and called to the Little Flapper.

"Bidy, come here! Hugh wants to dance with you."

Bidy flew across the room, and presently Marna was left alone with her husband.

"Make a good lookin' pair, eh, don't they?" Paget asked contentedly, his eyes following Hubbard and the Little Flapper. "Of course he's too old for her, but she might do worse. He'd be kind to her, at any rate, and that's half the battle, eh? He's a thunderin' good fellow."

Marna made some inaudible answer and turned away. She felt frightened because her heart was beating so fast. She told herself again angrily that of course it was absurd, and yet—she could not bear to see Hugh Hubbard with his arm round the Little Flapper's waist.

THE Big Flapper drummed on the window and stared out at the rain with disgusted eyes.

"I knew it would happen," she declared. "It's

our rotten English climate all over. Three days frost and then disgusting rain and a thaw! What's the good of buying skates and a toboggan, or *anything* I should like to know? I chased half round London yesterday for this"—she plucked angrily at the brightly-coloured jazz jumper she was wearing. "It would have looked simply topping up at Hampstead in the snow," she lamented. "And now look at the rain!"

"The jumper will come in for next winter," Biddy tried to console her, but the Big Flapper would have none of it.

"*Next* winter!" she almost screamed. "My poor child, even if we have any winter next year, do you imagine for one moment that jumpers will be in the fashion? Of course they won't." She dragged the offending garment off over her head and flung it down on the Little Flapper's bed. "Five and a half guineas wasted," she groaned. "It's always my luck! Nothing ever goes right for me."

The Little Flapper chuckled.

"It may freeze again to-night," she said hopefully. "And after all, we've had two perfectly lovely days of real winter, haven't we?"

The Big Flapper sniffed inelegantly.

"Two days out of three hundred and sixty-five," she scoffed. "It's a lot to be thankful for, isn't it? And to-morrow's the first of February, and before we know where we are Mr. Hubbard will be gone."

Biddy said "Oh!" very softly, and looked hard at her friend's perturbed face.

"Oh, is that the trouble!" she murmured.

"Of course it is!" The Big Flapper was nothing if not candid. "My dear, I'm just mad about him. Why do you think I spent five and a half guineas on *that* thing if it wasn't to please him? I heard him say how ripping Marna looked in hers, so yesterday I wasted half the day trying to get one like it, and now he'll probably never even see me in it!"

The Little Flapper did not think Hugh Hubbard would have noticed what Dolly Benson wore, nor how often she wore it; she knew that he had eyes for one woman only.

"By the way," the Big Flapper burst out again impulsively. "What's the matter with Marna? When she came down to breakfast this morning she looked as if she had been crying her eyes out, and all the laughing and joking in the world didn't hide it, either."

Biddy winced as if something had hurt her.

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "I thought her eyes looked rather red, but I didn't think anyone noticed it but me. Perhaps she had toothache last night, poor darling."

"Toothache!" echoed the Big Flapper with unutterable scorn. "Do you think Marna would lie awake for hours and cry her eyes out over *toothache*? She'd go and have every tooth in her head out first."

Biddy remained silent. Lately she had grown rather afraid of Dolly Benson's outspokenness and of her sharp, critical eyes that seemed to see so much. She knew that on more than one occasion since Hugh Hubbard's return a fortnight ago, Marna's lovely



eyes looked as if they had wept bitter tears, and her ready smiles sometimes seemed as if they were painted on her lips. Biddy sighed and shifted her hunched position on the end of the bed.

"It's not our business, anyway," she said rather shortly. "And we ought to go downstairs. It must be nearly lunch time."

"The men haven't come in yet," the Big Flapper declared from her post of vantage at the window. "Harnigan drove them all down to Mr. Paget's club after they knew Hampstead was a washout!" She gave a tremendous sigh, then laughed. "Biddy, wasn't Renny Martin frightfully funny last night?"

"Was he?"

"Of course he was. Weren't you there when he was holding forth about marriage? Weren't you there when he said he didn't believe there was such a thing as a happy marriage in the whole world? And he ought to know, considering he's been married twice."

"He was drunk," Biddy said disgustedly. She did not like Renny Martin.

"He generally is after six o'clock in the evening," the Big Flapper declared lightly. "And anyway, don't they say that a drunken man always speaks the truth?"

"I thought it was 'an angry man,'" Biddy corrected her mildly.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter much," Dolly Benson declared. "Anyway, Renny ought to be an authority. He's had lots of other affairs besides his two official marriages, and now he's in love with Marna or I'll eat my hat."

"What awful things you say!" the Little Flapper expostulated uncomfortably, but she was conscious of relief. If Dolly had centred her sharp eyes on Renny Martin, perhaps Hubbard had been allowed to escape.

"So he is in love with her," the Big Flapper insisted calmly. "And so are half the men who come here, only darling George Paget is so blind he can't see a single thing through that absurd monocle of his."

"There's nothing for him to see," Biddy said quickly.

The Big Flapper shrugged her shoulders.

"Anyway, I don't know how Marna does it!" she said enviously.

"Does *what*?" Biddy demanded.

"Looks so absurdly young," Dolly explained. "She must be quite thirty-five, if not more, and she's hardly got a line or a grey hair, and when she laughs she looks like a girl."

"She doesn't 'do' it at all," Biddy said emphatically. "It just does itself. Marna has never been to a beauty doctor or made herself up in all her life, I know that."

The Big Flapper passed a cautious hand across her forehead, where a perpetual habit of frowning had already formed a tiny furrow which all the careful massage in the world could not entirely irradicate.

"Well, I don't know how she does it," she murmured again disconsolately, and then, seeing the gathering wrath in Biddy's eyes, she hastened to add: "Or how it does *itself*, as you say it does!"

"Marna's got a lovely soul, that's what it is," the Little Flapper said dreamily. "And a lovely mind that never thinks an unkind thought about anyone, and a lovely heart that tries to do good to all the world."

The Big Flapper frowned. She was fond of Marna Paget but she was also faintly jealous of her. She did not think it right that a married woman, no longer even very young, should prove such a serious rival to girls of her own age.

"She's got a lovely fat banking account, too," she said in a snappy little voice. "And an ideal husband who worships the ground she walks on and asks no questions. And she's got hosts of admirers and tons of friends, and the most wonderful diamonds, and more clothes than she can possibly wear, and if all that doesn't give you a lovely soul nothing in this world *will!* We could *all* be angels if we were in Marna's shoes. Even *me!*"

Biddy's eyes flashed ominously.

"Marna would still be an angel and have a lovely soul if she hadn't any shoes at all," she said with simple faith.

She really believed what she said. Her love for Marna amounted to worship.

The Big Flapper laughed unkindly.

"You and Renny Martin ought to start a Mutual-Admiration-of-Marna-Society," she sneered. "You're evidently in total agreement on that subject, at any rate."

"I'm not in agreement with Renny Martin about *anything!*" Biddy cried in a rage. "I can't bear Renny Martin! He's got horrid eyes. He looks

at me as if—as if—well, not in at all a nice way,” she finished up rather lamely, and she thought suddenly of Hugh Hubbard’s eyes. That was the way she liked to be looked at; kindly and steadily.

The Big Flapper flushed.

“There’s nothing wrong with Renny,” she protested. “He’s ever so generous. He gives me heaps of chocolates and things.”

“He never gives me anything, thank goodness,” Biddy said calmly. “And I wouldn’t take them if he tried to make me, that’s another thing. I hate him, and I wonder Marna lets him come here at all.”

“Probably because if she’s such an angel as you make out, she can’t see anything the matter with him,” Dolly answered sharply. She was in a bad temper. The affair of the jazz jumper had thoroughly upset her. “Some people’s eyes can never see any farther than the end of their own nose,” she added hastily. “Unless it suits them.”

“Marna’s got lovely eyes,” Biddy declared. She always took things literally. “If I were a poet I could write heavenly verses to Marna’s eyes.”

Dolly Benson looked unutterable scorn.

“They’re most *ordinary* eyes,” she declared.

“They’ve got the loveliest expression I’ve ever seen,” Biddy answered firmly, though there was a little tremble in her voice. “They make me think of music in church, or of that Madonna in Uncle George’s room—he told me he bought it because it reminded him of Marna when she was looking her happiest.”

“And *that’s* not very often, then!” the Big

Flapper said promptly. "Because Marna hardly ever looks happy."

Little Biddy stared indignantly.

"What in the world do you mean?" she demanded.

The Big Flapper turned away from the window and, taking up one of Biddy's ivory brushes which Marna had given her for a birthday present, began a furious onslaught on her sleek head.

"What I say, my child!" she insisted aggravatingly. "And I'm not the only one that says it. Here! I'll tell you something." She swung round, putting the brush down again. "You know Mrs. Blair?"

"Well?"

"Well, you know the night of your dance—the night Mr. Hubbard came?"

"Well?" Biddy was not conceding an inch.

"Well, I heard Mrs. Blair talking to him. You know the sort of voice she's got—you can hear it anywhere."

"I expect you were listening," Biddy said angrily.

The Big Flapper only laughed. She enjoyed annoying Biddy even though as a rule the two girls were good friends.

"I wasn't," she answered carelessly. "At any rate not at first. But I heard Mrs. Blair tell him that she was very sorry for Marna."

"Sorry for her!"

"Um!" The Big Flapper nodded. "Mrs. Blair quite went for poor Mr. Hubbard. She said that *she* didn't go through life wearing blinkers if

everyone else did; she said that she was quite sure Marna was fretting about something——”

Biddy sprang to her feet, her cheeks crimson, her eyes very indignant.

“It was hateful of you to have listened!” she cried passionately. “Hateful of you!”

Dolly Benson looked a trifle ashamed, but she tried to bluff through the situation with her usual defiance.

“I thought you’d like to hear about your adored Marna!” she protested. “I thought you’d be interested to hear that Mrs. Blair called her a ‘lonely, unloved woman.’”

“She didn’t! And if she did it’s a wicked lie. Uncle George loves the very ground she walks on, and so do I!”

“Pooh! As if you counted, or George Paget either!” the Big Flapper sneered. She snapped her fingers. “Do you think I don’t *know* why Marna’s always crying!” she asked deliberately. “Do you think I’m so blind that I can’t see that she’s as crazy about Hugh Hubbard as Renny Martin is about her?” She laughed. “I’m not such a fool as George Paget is, even if you think I am.”

There was a moment’s silence, then Biddy walked close up to her. She was as white as death, but her eyes blazed.

“If you ever say anything like that to me again,” she said in a voice that was cold with concentrated passion, “if you ever dare to say such a thing again to me—or to anyone else, I’ll—I’ll *kill* you!”

The two girls looked steadily into one another’s eyes, then the Big Flapper laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Heavens! How melodramatic we are!" she said lightly. "I was only joking. Every woman is in love with some other man nowadays, it's the fashion, so why shouldn't Marna be?"

"Because she isn't; because it's not true," Biddy panted. She was trembling with rage.

Dolly only laughed.

"Well, don't have a fit about it," she protested. "What's the matter with you all at once? Anyone would think you are in love with my beautiful Hugh yourself."

She turned to the door humming a little snatch of song, turning to look at Biddy over her shoulder with an impudent smile.

The Little Flapper was standing at the foot of the bed, her hands hanging limply at her sides, a lost sort of look on her white face.

Dolly Benson laughed again.

"Hit the nail on the head that time, did I?" she teased. "Well, we can't *all* have him, that's certain!" and she was gone, slamming the door behind her.

Biddy groped backwards and sat down on the side of the bed, her shaking hands clutching at the soft quilt.

So the Big Flapper knew!

Knew! Knew what? she asked herself confusedly. Knew that Marna and Hugh Hubbard loved one another, or that she herself—a little unsophisticated flapper of eighteen—had dared—*dared* to raise her eyes to a man many years her senior—a man to whom she was nothing more than a child, and never would be! . . . "Anyone would think you are in

love with my beautiful Hugh yourself. . . ." The mocking words haunted her.

She heard the car come up the drive and the sound of George Paget's voice in the hall; she heard the gong sound for lunch, but still she did not move.

Then she heard Marna's voice calling :

" Biddy ! Biddy dear ! "

The Little Flapper rose and moved stiffly to the door, dragging it open with cold fingers.

" Coming, darling—just coming."

Down in the hall the Big Flapper stood at the foot of the stairs, talking to Hugh Hubbard.

Biddy heard her saying :

" I gave five and a half guineas for the beastly thing, and now I don't suppose I shall ever wear it."

And then Hugh in reply :

" Do you mean to say that a child like you is allowed to spend all that money on a sweater ? "

So he treated the Big Flapper like a child, and she was several years older than Biddy.

" He must think I'm just a baby," the Little Flapper told herself humbly. " If he ever thinks about me at all ! "

And then, as if her thought reached him, Hubbard raised his eyes and saw her coming down the stairs.

He was looking rather preoccupied, but he smiled as he met the Little Flapper's wistful gaze, smiled as a man might smile at a child who is anxious to make friends with him.

Biddy stood still; she felt as if something had



turned in her heart,` as the frightened knowledge came suddenly home to her.

"I do love him—Dolly was quite right. I do love him."

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter VII*

WITH the unexpected thaw the sharp snap of winter seemed to die away, and the February days turned mild and sunny with a breath of real spring in the air.

There were little fat, swelling buds on the trees in Regent's Park opposite the Pagets' house, and yellow and purple crocuses in the grass.

Marna's house party stayed on, though each one of them individually made a half-hearted suggestion that it was time to depart.

"Mother says I am outstaying my welcome and ought to go home," the Big Flapper told Marna reluctantly one morning, but Marna laughingly dismissed the idea.

"You'll be wishing me at the bottom of the sea, Mrs. Paget," Renny Martin said to her. "I only meant to stay for the dance, and how long ago is that? Nearly three weeks."

"Why talk about time when we are all quite happy," Marna answered quickly.

She had a nervous horror of the party breaking up. It seemed to her that as long as everyone else stayed,

Hugh Hubbard would stay. She felt that at all costs she must not let him remember that he had only come home for a few weeks.

The time was slipping away so quickly—and she knew that soon a day would come when a fast-moving train and an ever-widening space between her and a great liner heading for the open sea, would break her heart and plunge her back into loneliness and despair.

She did her best to keep the thought at bay; she laughed and joked through the days, throwing herself eagerly into any amusement that was going, but at night black dread and despair crowded around her, and she had almost to fight them away with physical hands.

She lay awake for hours in the darkness, little pools of tears on her closed lids which she dared not allow to fall, clenching her teeth to keep back the sobbing that would rise to her throat. It was in vain that she tried to cheat herself into the belief that something would happen to keep Hubbard in England—she knew well enough that in real life no such miracles occur—she knew that in spite of all her struggles against Time and Fate, her wrists were held by them both, and that she was being mercilessly hurried along to her doom. And at last one day the subject was broached.

George Paget had come home with tickets for the first night of a new musical comedy—he would never go to a theatre unless, as he boyishly put it, “there were plenty of legs and catchy music.”

“Got the first row of the stalls,” he announced cheerily at dinner. “Bullied the chap into letting me

have six seats." He grinned across at his wife like a delighted schoolboy. "Marna never thought I'd get 'em, did you, Marna?"

"I think it is very clever of you, George," Marna answered gently. "Which night is it?"

"Oh, another ten days yet, but you have to book a long way ahead for a first night. Ever been to a first night, Hugh?"

Hubbard shook his head.

"Never! and I'm afraid I shan't be able to go to this one. I must be getting back to work."

"Getting back to work!" The Big Flapper caught up his words in frank dismay. "Oh, how perfectly *foul*!"

Hubbard laughed.

"Sorry, but for me work is a necessary evil. I went down to the shipping office this morning and booked on the *Karmala*."

There was a sharp silence. The Little Flapper put down her knife and fork and stared across at Hubbard with wide eyes and parted lips. In her happy youth she had lost sight of the fact that all things must come to an end. She felt as if someone had squeezed her heart with ungentle fingers. Then Marna said composedly, her eyes intent on a peach she was peeling:

"The *Karmala*! Isn't that one of the P. and O. boats, Hugh?"

"Yes."

"When does she sail?"

The Little Flapper turned her dazed eyes to Marna's face. She looked so calm, she spoke with such indifference.

"How can she bear it, how can she?" Biddy asked herself passionately.

She had yet to learn that the deepest wounds are often those which never bleed outwardly. Her own young romantic love for Hubbard was of the kind that could only find a vent in silent tears and dream rapture.

"She sails on the 15th of April," Hubbard answered.

The Big Flapper gave a great sigh.

"Oh, that's ages away yet! Nearly a month. I thought you meant you were going to-morrow."

Hubbard laughed, not very mirthfully.

"So I ought to be. I've lots of things to see to before I leave London. I've been shockingly lazy so far."

"What's a holiday for if one can't be lazy about it?" Paget asked cheerily. "You don't take enough holidays, Hugh. You've not been home for five years, and now you're only staying about five minutes. It's all nonsense. We don't intend to let you go yet, eh, Marna?"

"Hugh knows best," Marna answered. "We mustn't persuade him against his will. I dare say he has had more than enough of us, George."

It was deliberately cruel, but she could not help it. The thing she had so dreaded had come with the first roll of the drums, and she had to deal out pain in order to try and conceal her own.

She knew that the end was already in sight, and once again she was to be left with empty hands. She had hardly seen Hubbard alone for more than a moment at a time—there had always been someone at

hand crowding upon them. As she sat there at the head of the table, outwardly so calm and indifferent, a thousand jealous questions were torturing her. Would he be glad to go? Since that first night he had not spoken of his love for her, had given no sign. Only sometimes she had seemed to read in his eyes . . . but perhaps that too had only been her imagination.

She looked up suddenly and met Hubbard's gaze, and instantly he tried to steel its ineffable sadness to smiling indifference, instantly he was answering her lightly-spoken words as lightly.

"I think the boot must be on the other foot. You and George must be sick of the sight of me."

Marna laughed and pushed back her chair.

"We are, of course we are! But don't you think we've managed to conceal the fact rather well?"

She walked out of the room, followed by the Big Flapper and the Little Flapper, and the three men were left alone.

Renny Martin put out a rather unsteady hand and refilled his glass with port. He was a very rugged-looking man with rough, sandy-coloured hair and deep-set eyes. There were more lines in his face than his age warranted, and he had a rather loose, sensual mouth.

"Why don't you chuck your job, Hubbard, and stay in England?" he asked.

Hugh laughed cynically.

"And starve, or live on my friends? Which do you suggest?"

Hugh Hubbard did not like Renny Martin any more than the Little Flapper liked him.

"You know there'd be no need for you to do either, old man," George Paget said. "I told you the other day that Tom Sawyer—head of Sawyer and Sons—promised me——"

Hubbard cut in almost rudely.

"I hate England. I've no wish to live in England."

Renny Martin chuckled.

"Perhaps it's a case of 'The Girl He Left Behind Him'—in China!" he suggested.

Hubbard made no answer and Martin went on after draining his glass.

"There's always a woman, bless 'em! Take my own life, for instance! Milestoned with petticoats. Been the ruin of me, petticoats have."

Paget cut in cheerily.

"Well, they don't wear 'em any longer, so you can cheer up! Young sinner old saint, Martin! You've got lots of time to reform. Have some more port."

Martin pushed his glass across the table. He disliked George Paget and despised him because he was apparently blind to most things that went on directly beneath his nose, and because he never seemed to see how he was sponged upon by most of his so-called friends, and because he was entirely unconscious of the tragedy being so silently endured by Marna and Hugh Hubbard.

Renny Martin knew all about it. He possessed a certain unpleasant shrewdness that easily put him wise to many things concerning people in whom he was interested. But it suited him for the moment to pretend complete ignorance—he felt that he could afford to sit on the fence and bide his time.

He coveted Marna for himself and had not yet given up hope of winning her. Conceit was the stronger trait in his character—his favourite boast was that with patience he could get any woman he wanted. He liked to play with a woman as a cat will play with a mouse—and like a cat also, he had no real use for his victim once he had wearied of the play.

He knew instinctively how Marna had been tortured during those last few moments at dinner—her apparent calmness and indifference had not for one moment deceived him—and in his heart he was hating Hubbard for having succeeded where so far he himself had failed, hating him most of all because he knew him to be still an honourable man.

Here was no wife-stealer; here was a strong man who would go away with his love and longing unappeased. And Renny Martin cursed him for a fool, even while he reluctantly admired him.

Martin believed in neither God nor Devil—he lived entirely for himself and for the moment. He was incapable of real or lasting affection, although he always believed that his latest *affaire de cœur* was the one great passion of his wastrel life. At the moment he believed himself to be desperately in love with Marna Paget, but had she shown any sign of reciprocation his ardour would immediately have cooled. He was a man whose fires needed to be fed on coldness and indifference.

“What d’ye do with yourself in Shanghai, Hugh?” George Paget asked abruptly.

Hubbard started.

“What do I do? Oh, work.”

" Yes, but when the work's done. D'ye dance or play cards? What sort of enjoyment do you get out there—recreations, don't you know? "

" Oh, there's a club. We play bridge and poker. I read a good many books too. The time passes quickly enough."

But there was a keen note of bitterness in Hubbard's voice as he recalled an infinity of tortuous hours during which he had sat with a disregarded book on his knees and an unlit pipe clenched between his teeth, staring before him into an empty future which he knew must always remain empty.

And again he told himself that he had been a fool to come home, a fool to deliberately tear open the old wound with the certain knowledge in his heart that this time it could never again even partially heal. It seemed to him as he sat staring across at Marna's empty chair that to-night he had reached the limit of his endurance, and that it would be a relief when he found himself once more on ship-board, with the ever-widening sea between himself and the woman he adored.

For the past weeks had taught him that his love for Marna Paget had grown a thousandfold with separation. He had come home driven not only by his longing to see her again, but also by an almost childish curiosity in his own emotions and the desire to discover if they were still as deep and sincere as he imagined. And his first glimpse of Marna's face had given him the answer.

There was no moment of the day when she did not fill his thoughts, no moment of the day when he could forget her—even for a second. She was in his blood;



she had been made for him, and neither time nor separation could alter it.

George Paget was rattling on again cheerily.

"Should like to see Shanghai. Shouldn't be surprised if I don't take a trip out there some day, don't cher know."

Renny Martin looked at Hubbard with a sly smile in his deep-set eyes.

"Wonder you don't," he said. "Mrs. Paget would enjoy it immensely, I should think."

Hubbard frowned.

"It's not much of a climate," he interposed quickly. "Not worth the long journey just for a holiday."

"Mrs. Paget would probably disagree with you," Renny Martin murmured.

The two men looked at one another across the table and Renny smiled—a slow, detestable smile of infinite meaning.

"Oh, Marna's a splendid traveller," George Paget broke in happily. "Better than I am! Takes the smooth with the rough without a word of complaint, bless her! Hullo! what's up now, little 'un?"

For the door had suddenly been burst open by the Little Flapper.

"Marna says you're to hurry up. Mrs. Blair's just rung through and asked us all out to Finchley to dance. Harnigan's getting both cars ready and either you or Mr. Hubbard is to drive the two-seater, Uncle George."

She danced excitedly round to his chair and bending, lightly kissed his cheek.

"Won't you serve us all alike?" Renny Martin inquired with mock envy.

The Little Flapper haughtily ignored him and turned again to the door.

"And hurry, hurry, hurry!" she admonished them all.

Paget drained his glass and pushed back his chair.

"No peace for the wicked," he grumbled, but he looked quite happy. "You can drive the two-seater, Hugh. I'm not keen on driving at night. Getting old and nervy, don't yer know."

"Nonsense," Hugh protested. "You're the youngest of us all."

"Probably because he's the happiest," Martin said cynically.

They went out into the hall; Marna was coming downstairs, a soft, white fur wrap over her frock.

"I hope nobody minds," she apologized. "But Biddy and Dolly love dancing so much, I just hadn't the heart to refuse to go."

"Don't we all love dancing," Renny Martin said. He made Marna a mock bow. "Fair lady, at your tiny feet——" he began melodramatically.

George Paget cuffed him good-humouredly aside.

"Hugh's going to drive the Renault," he told his wife. "Don't know who'll trust themselves to his tender care, but——"

"Oh, I will," Marna answered readily. "And I like the Renault, you and Renny can take the girls, George."

She spoke calmly enough but she was not calm. Ever since that moment at dinner when Hubbard had announced his intended departure she had been on the verge of breaking down. The strain of his presence and of keeping up appearances before her

guests had told upon her more severely than she had guessed.

Renny Martin, watching her, saw how tightly her fingers were clenched on the folds of her white wrap as she held it closely around her throat, and how hard and set was the smile with which she greeted Biddy and the Big Flapper as they tumbled excitedly downstairs after one another.

A maid crossed the hall.

"Harnigan has got both cars outside, if you please, Madam."

The Little Flapper danced up to Marna.

"How are we going, darling? And is Uncle George going to drive the Renault?"

"No, Mr. Hubbard will, and I am going with him. Harnigan will take the rest of you."

"Oh!" The smallest shadow fell over the Little Flapper's face. For a moment she had hoped—almost dared to hope as she looked across at Hubbard, that perhaps—perhaps——

Then she pulled up her wandering thoughts sharply. As if Hubbard would even be aware of her existence while Marna was near.

The Big Flapper pirouetted to the front.

"I'd simply *love* to go in the Renault with Mr. Hubbard," she declared, true as ever to her policy that if you want a thing, the best way is to be frank about it and say so, but Marna only smiled and shook her head.

"No, I'm going myself. Hurry up all of you, we're wasting time. It's nine o'clock already."

She turned to the open door, the others crowding after her.

It was a clear, fine night and the headlights of the two cars cut into the darkness like sword-blades.

Harnigan stood at the door of the big limousine, sphinx-like and unemotional.

Biddy scrambled in, followed by Dolly Benson.

George Paget lingered a moment to speak to Hugh Hubbard.

"No racing, mind! I'm not sure that I trust Marna to you."

Marna laughed.

"We'll race you," she teased him. "I shall make Hugh get there first, you'll see."

The big car glided away into the darkness, leaving Marna standing on the path with Hugh Hubbard.

"Well—are we ready?" he asked.

He avoided looking at her.

"Quite ready."

She got into the little coupé and Hubbard followed.

"You'll have to show me the way," he said.

"I've never been to Mrs. Blair's before, you know."

"It's quite easy to find," Marna assured him.

"And it's a lovely house, Hugh."

"Is it?" His voice was abstracted. "Sure you're warm enough?" he asked.

"Quite warm, thank you." Impulsively she slipped her bare hand into his. "Feel!" she commanded.

His fingers closed over hers in a sudden electric grip quickly released, but he said nothing, and they started away through the clear night.

Marna moved a little nearer to him so that their arms touched and she closed her eyes with a feeling of utter contentment that was almost pain. It was

wonderful at last to be able to relax her strained nerves and forget that there were such things in the world as watchful or suspicious eyes. A block in the traffic brought them to a standstill at the cross-road, and Marna spoke suddenly:

"Is it true—what you said at dinner to-night—about having booked a passage on the *Karmala*?"

"Quite true."

He felt her sudden, convulsive movement, and driven to the limit of endurance, he broke out:

"Why did you come with me to-night, Marna? Why did you?"

"Because I had to." Her voice was as passionate as his. "Because I can't bear it any longer, Hugh. Since you came home I've never been alone with you for a single moment. Whenever I speak to you there are always eyes staring at us—people watching us. Oh, didn't you *want* me to come?" she appealed desolately.

"*Want* you?" he laughed roughly. "What's the use of wanting? Every moment we spend together only makes things harder to bear."

The traffic block had dispersed and they were moving on again. Marna was silent for a moment, then she broke out desperately:

"Why need you go so soon? Oh, don't leave me again just yet, Hugh. If you could only be somewhere near—just in England—so that I could see you sometimes. I wouldn't care if it was only once in six months or once a year——"

"Do you think that would make us any happier? Don't you think it would be all the worse to know that we *could* see one another sometimes?"

"Nothing could be worse than what I have suffered for these last five years—nothing! When I think of having to face it all again I would rather die, much rather."

"It was criminal of me to come home," Hubbard said hoarsely.

Marna moved closer to him and pressed her cheek against his coat.

"Don't say that. It's been something, anyway—it will be something to remember when—if—afterwards——"

Her voice broke, and Hubbard heard her sobbing.

He sat staring before him, utterly at a loss to know how to help her or how to comfort. They were like rats in a trap he thought bitterly—in a nice comfortable trap concerning which there was no reasonable cause for complaint except that they could not get out of it.

He spoke at last angrily.

"Don't cry, Marna, I can't bear to hear you cry. It breaks my heart."

With a great effort she checked her sobbing.

"I'm sorry—but it's such a relief not to have to be acting. You don't know what it's been all this time—how I've felt."

"I do know."

She went on wildly.

"It's all the more horrible because it's nobody's fault. We can't blame anyone. George is the best and kindest man in the world, and I would rather die than hurt him and yet—oh, Hugh, it's like being in prison—it's like being stifled—like being left without air to breathe."

"I know."

"And it will always be the same. Nothing can ever happen that will put things right." Her dreadful sobbing began again.

They were out of the suburbs now, and in comparative quiet, and Hugh Hubbard deliberately drew the car to the side of the road and stopped the engine.

Then he turned in his seat and took Marna into his arms.

"I must—just this once," he said brokenly.

"Oh, Hugh."

She put her arms round his neck, hiding her face against his shoulder, and then for long moments neither of them spoke—they just clung to one another and kissed, while the dark shadows of the past and the even darker shadows of the future slipped away and for a little were forgotten. There was no need for words—the clasp of Hubbard's arms told Marna how much he loved her, and the trembling passion of her lips answered him. Then Hubbard moved, turning her face up to his for a last kiss.

"We must be going on, my dear."

Going on! that was how they spent their lives, going on alone down roads which could never join together save now and again for a few painful steps which made the rest of the way all the harder.

He tried gently to unclasp her arms from about his neck, but she resisted passionately.

"You do love me, Hugh—you do love me?"

"Do you need to ask me?"

"And you will never love anyone else? Promise

me! promise me!" she whispered in anguish, and then with quick revulsion, "What is the use of promising. I shall never know if you do or not. I may never see you again——"

"Marna—you are only torturing yourself and me."

"It's so much worse for me. You're free—quite free, and I'm quite tied—tied—a prisoner——"

Then suddenly she let him go, turning away from him and hiding her face in her hands.

"Oh, I'm a beast, a beast," she whispered passionately. "I deserve to die for feeling as I do about George. He's so good, and I'm not worth loving."

Hubbard drew her hands gently down from her face, holding them both in his.

"I love you, and only you," he said. "There will never be any other woman in my life."

He could feel her eyes upon him through the darkness.

"And when shall I see you again—when shall I see you again?" she asked brokenly.

Hubbard tried to laugh.

"I am not going away yet—not for several weeks."

"But when you *have* gone—after that, I mean? Oh, I can't bear it if you stay away for so many years again."

"We won't think about it. Something may happen—something may happen——"

There he was again, a wretched rat in a trap, going round and round, seeking in vain for a way of escape.



Marna closed her eyes and her hands were cold in his.

"Nothing will ever happen," she said. "What can happen? Just *nothing!*"

Hubbard raised her hands to his lips, kissing them many times, but he could find no words with which to answer her. What was there to say? There was no way out for either of them.

"We must be going on, my dear," he said once more and Marna answered:

"Very well. I don't care. Nothing matters."

They drove on in silence through the darkness and when next Marna spoke it was only to direct him along the road.

"It's the next turning on the right and then there's a white carriage gate on the left."

"Are we there so soon?"

"I thought perhaps you would be glad to be rid of me," she answered bitterly.

She heard him draw a hard breath.

"Need you be so cruel, Marna?"

She could not speak—she had to clench her teeth to keep back a fresh burst of sobbing.

They were quite close to the Blairs' house now—in a moment they would have to face a sea of interested, inquisitive eyes—in a moment she would have to put on the mask which for a little while had been cast aside.

Hugh slowed the car up.

"I'll get down and open the gate," he said.

"It's generally open," Marna answered. But to-night it was closed. "I dare say the catch slipped back," she said mechanically.

Hubbard got down to open it. In the strong light of the head-lamps she could see every line of his figure, and the hard expression of pain on his face.

It seemed impossible that a moment ago she had been held in his arms and felt his lips upon hers—impossible that for a little while she had escaped from the hell in which her love for this man imprisoned her, and into which she was again being forced.

"I can't bear it, I can't," she told herself wildly, but she knew that she must. She knew that in a moment she would have to be laughing and telling some story about having missed the turning in order to account for their lateness—in a moment the Little Flapper would be clamouring round her, and George with his loving anxiety, and the Big Flapper with her loud, assertive voice.

She could not bear it, she could not.

Hubbard opened the gate and came back. He took his seat beside her, but for a moment he made no attempt to drive on.

Then he spoke, his voice rough with emotion.

"Marna, say you love me. Let me hear you say just once, 'I love you, Hugh.'"

But Marna could not speak. She had to fight for control of her voice, and when at last it came it was only a whisper.

"I love you, Hugh," and Hubbard answered:

"And I love *you* with all my heart and soul and body, and if anyone ever tells you that I have changed, don't believe it, because it will be a lie. I shall never change—never."

He put one arm round her, drawing her close to him, and bending he kissed her lips.

"Good-bye, my dear, and God bless you for ever and ever."

Marna cried out sharply:

"But it's not good-bye, I shall see you again before you go? Oh, Hugh, promise me that you will say good-bye to me alone before you go."

"I can't. I couldn't bear it. If we've got to part why not now? It will only make it worse—more impossible."

She clung to him with shaking hands.

"No, no, promise me, Hugh! Just once more. Just one day together. George will not mind."

"I know. That's so damnable. George trusts us."

"We've done nothing to be ashamed of. We've never wronged him."

"Not even in our thoughts, Marna?"

She would not listen, she only pleaded over and over again.

"Promise me. Promise!"

In the end he gave way.

"Very well. I promise."

"And you don't hate me, Hugh. You don't hate me because I can't be as strong as you are, because I can't face things as you do?"

"*Hate* you? If you only understood how I love you."

Marna caught her breath on a little sigh of contentment.

"I can go on now, Hugh," she said after a moment.

They drove up to the house in silence.

TO Marna's relief she and Hugh arrived at the Blairs' first.

"George must have had a puncture," she said. She laughed shakily. "Oh, won't Harnigan be angry? He has been priding himself that so far he hasn't had one puncture this year."

"The roads are so very bad just now," Mrs. Blair said. She was trailing round in a velvet dress which looked as if it had been lifted bodily from an Early Victorian portrait, and as usual she wore her dog collar of pearls. She touched Marna's cheek with a kind hand. "You look very tired," she said sympathetically. "All those young people are too much for you. I should send them away, if I were you, and take a rest cure."

Marna shivered.

"They're all going soon," she answered with a forced little laugh. "They're all going to desert me. Even Mr. Hubbard is tired of us, and has booked his passage back."

Mrs. Blair looked at Hugh.

"So soon?" she asked.

"So soon!" he echoed. "I've been home several months! I'm sure I must have worn out my welcome long ago."

Young Blair dashed up to them, followed by Renny Martin.

"Mr. Martin's come," he announced. "It

appears they've had *two* punctures, one within half a mile of the other, so Mr. Martin came on to reassure Mrs. Paget that everyone was all right and not lying in the ditch."

"George thought you might all be anxious," Martin explained casually. He looked at Marna. "I tried to persuade the girls to walk with me, but they were afraid of spoiling their shoes." He bent down to her. "May I have the pleasure of the first dance?" he asked.

Marna shot a swift glance at Hugh Hubbard, but he was not looking at her.

"Thank you," she said mechanically.

There was a gramophone playing in a room which had been cleared and a dozen young couples were already dancing.

"So you kept your word and made Hubbard get here first," Renny Martin said. He looked down at Marna with hot eyes. "What magic did you use, I wonder?"

"As a matter of fact," Marna answered composedly. "We didn't come at any great speed. I missed the turning and we had to go back some way."

She did not trust Renny Martin, and to-night she was afraid of him, but then in her unnerved state she felt that she was afraid of everything and everyone.

And yet what did it matter what people thought or said? The only living, feeling part of her was with Hugh Hubbard, suffering with him.

They danced the length of the room twice without speaking again, then Martin said abruptly :

"They generally leave the carriage gate open, don't they?"

"Yes, I think they do," Marna answered absently, "but to-night it was shut when we got there. Mr. Hubbard had to open it."

"So I saw."

"Did you?" Then with a sudden shock she realized that there was a subtle meaning in his quiet voice. She looked up with startled eyes, the colour rushing headlong to her white cheeks. "What do you mean?" she asked breathlessly.

Renny Martin shrugged his shoulder.

"Only that I was the unwilling witness of a very touching little scene at Mrs. Blair's gate—the proof positive of something which I have all along vaguely suspected and been in sympathy with."

Marna stood quite still, her hand falling from his shoulder. She felt as if someone had struck her over the heart, and she knew that she was trembling.

A laughing couple bumped into them, and apologized cheerfully.

"We are rather in the line of fire," Renny Martin said. He took Marna's hand. "Shall we go and sit down somewhere?"

She went with him apathetically, and he found two chairs in a corner of a greenhouse built out at one end of the long room. It was dimly lit and fragrant with exotic perfume.

Marna sat down and closed her eyes. She tried hard to steady her shaken nerves, but they seemed to have stampeded far beyond her control. She wanted to say, "How dare you say such things to me? If my husband knew——" but how could she? If

George knew it would mean an end of everything for them all.

"An end of everything," she told herself fiercely, and longed for that ending to come. No more subterfuge, and lying, and pretending. They would all be out in the open together, with the truth laid bare before them.

For a moment the temptation to face the exposure seized her in its grip. Anything would be better than what she was enduring now and must go on enduring. George would be kind to her no matter how badly he suffered—George would always be kind to her, she was sure, even when he knew the truth.

Yes, and that was the reason why he must *not* know! The reason why she could never be honest and go to him and say: "I love someone else, I'm sorry—so dreadfully sorry—but I can't go on living with you; it will kill me. Be generous and let me go."

It was because she knew that whatever it cost him he would be generous, that she could never let George know the truth. She must go on deceiving him, fighting down her pain rather than that he who was so entirely free from blame, should suffer.

With a supreme effort she opened her eyes and looked at Renny Martin.

"May I ask what use you propose to make of your eavesdropping?" she asked cuttingly.

He looked taken aback. He had never really understood Marna, and he had expected tears, and pleadings, and perhaps an attempt to silence him.

"I can only assure you that I was a most

sympathetic onlooker," he said with a detestable smile. "I envy Hubbard his good fortune even while I despise his cowardice. To have so much lying within his grasp and to refuse it either means that he is afraid to take what the gods offer him, or that he does not sufficiently appreciate the gift." He laid his hand over Marna's in a close grip. "If it had only been me——" he said in a whisper.

Marna drew her hand sharply away as if he had hurt her. Her first chill fear of this man was swallowed up in such a feeling of loathing that she could hardly speak, but after a moment she found her voice.

"You will please leave my house to-night, and never come back." She rose to her feet and Martin rose too, but he was smiling and unconcerned.

"Isn't that rather inviting gossip and speculation?" he asked amicably. "I assure you that I haven't a single uncharitable feeling towards you, Marna. But if you insist that I 'leave your house to-night' as you so dramatically express it, I shall have to explain matters to your husband, and then—— Ah, here he comes!"

George Paget had entered the conservatory and now came anxiously towards them.

"I'm so sorry, m'dear," he said to Marna. "Two confounded punctures within a mile. Harnigan nearly cried. But we've got here safely. Glad you walked on, Martin—Marna might have been worried, don't cher know."

"Yes," Martin agreed. "I'm very glad I walked on." He looked at Marna. "I was just telling Mrs. Paget that I feel I really ought to take myself



home to-morrow. The length of my visit must be a positive infliction."

Marna tried to speak, but her lips felt dry. She looked at her husband, and the adoration in his eyes brought a choking sensation to her throat. How could she hurt him, how could she?

With an effort she forced a little laugh.

"What nonsense. We're only too pleased to have you," she said lightly. After all, it was for such a very short time longer. Hugh would soon be gone, and then nothing would matter any more.

Renny Martin was close beside her.

"Does that mean I am to stay?" he asked with mock humility.

Marna laid a hand on her husband's arm. It gave her a sense of comfort and security to feel him beside her.

"Of course. We want you to stay," she said.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter IX*

THE week that followed the impromptu dance at the Blairs' house was one of supreme torture to Marna.

It seemed to her overstrung nerves that everyone was conspiring together to hurt her and make her suffer.

Renny Martin devoted himself to her, and the little quiet smile in his eyes whenever they met her own

was almost more than she could bear. It seemed to be a deliberate reminder that they shared a secret, and the kinder and more attentive he was to her the more desperately she hated him. Sometimes that hatred frightened her; she seemed to measure its depths by the depths of her love for Hubbard.

And the time was flying by.

The Big Flapper openly bewailed Hugh's departure.

"Won't it be frightful when he's gone?" she said to Marna in her exaggerated way. "Life won't be worth living, will it? I shall go and bury myself somewhere. You'll let me stay on till the bitter end, won't you?"

"Stay as long as you like," Marna answered. "I'm sure Mr. Hubbard ought to be flattered at so much devotion."

There was a nasty little gleam in the Big Flapper's eyes, but she answered frankly:

"It's like me! I always go off the deep end over everything. If I love anyone I have to grovel, and if I hate anyone I have to murder them."

"You ought to be put under restraint," George Paget said amiably. He never took anyone too seriously; he regarded the Big Flapper as a sentimental schoolgirl, but it did occur to him that perhaps Hugh Hubbard might do worse than consider her. One evening he went out of his way to mention it to his friend.

It was just before dinner, and the two men were smoking together in the library.

Hubbard had been out all day, "on the firm's business" so he explained, but in reality he had

only absented himself because he could not bear to see Marna's tragic eyes and determinedly smiling lips.

The days dragged for him. Sometimes he wondered fiercely if they would ever go. He felt stifled, imprisoned; the constant strain of being so near the woman he loved seemed almost worse than separation. He had made up his mind that at the end of the week he would make some excuse and move into an hotel. He was about to mention it to Paget when the elder man said suddenly :

"Decent little girl—Biddy's friend."

"Yes," Hubbard answered absently; he had hardly realized to whom the remark applied.

Paget stuck his eyeglass fiercely in his eye.

"You might do worse, don't cher know," he said awkwardly. "And she's pinned her fancy on you all right."

Hubbard looked up with vague eyes.

"What on earth are you wandering about?" he demanded.

George Paget laughed.

"Talking about Biddy's friend—Dolly Benson. Fine lookin' girl, don't yer think? Might do worse than take her back to Shanghai with you, eh?"

The dull colour rose slowly to Hubbard's face.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked quietly.

Paget looked taken aback.

"Oh, all right. No offence. Only a friendly hint. The girl likes you, and——"

"She's only a child," Hubbard said angrily. "And you can get that bee out of your bonnet as soon as you like."

" Oh, all right ! "

There was an awkward silence which Paget broke with a friendly effort.

" All joking apart, Hugh, why don't you get married? All the women like you——"

" Much obliged to them, I'm sure."

" And if you don't marry, you'll miss more than half the happiness there is in life," Paget went on serenely. " I'm sure I never knew what happiness was till Marna took me in hand. Fact, I assure you."

" I've no doubt." It was all exquisite torture which Hubbard interrupted bluntly with the subject uppermost in his mind. " I'm going to clear out on Saturday and go to an hotel."

Paget's handsome face took on the expression of an injured boy.

" By Jove, if you're offended——" he broke out.

Hubbard laughed, and slapped his friend on the shoulder.

" Silly old ass! You couldn't offend me if you, tried. No, it's only that I've so much to see to before I go that I shall feel more free if I'm on my own so to speak. You've been a brick to me, and I'm ashamed of the way I've stayed on, but I'll clear off on Saturday and wind up my affairs. Time's getting short, you know."

" We shall miss you," Paget said stolidly, but he was not altogether sorry at his friend's sudden decision. If Hubbard went, perhaps Renny Martin would go also, and lately Paget had felt vaguely disturbed at Martin's devotion to Marna. Not that there was anything on Marna's side, he knew, but all

the same it was confounded cheek of the fellow to follow her round as he did. Hubbard was as good as his word, and on the following Saturday he moved to an hotel in St. James's Street. Marna took it very quietly when she was told; perhaps in a way it was even a relief to her.

"All good things come to an end," she said lightly. She looked Hubbard straight in the eyes unflinchingly. "We've had a very jolly time together, all of us, haven't we?"

"Very jolly."

"I suppose that means that *I've* got to go too," the Big Flapper said disconsolately. She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, well, once a party begins to break up, it might as well be completely smashed and have done," she added.

"I'm sure your mother must think I am going to keep you for ever," Marna said smilingly.

"I wish you would," was Dolly's blunt retort. "I wish I were Biddy! I'd just love to live here with you and Mr. Paget."

She waited hopefully, but Marna only laughed.

"I think I've got as much as I can manage," she said quietly, but she put out a hand to Biddy.

She felt that she wanted someone to hold on to, someone who loved her.

And the following morning Hubbard went away.

"It's not the end. I shall see him again—often!" Marna told herself desperately as she stood in the hall laughing and trying to talk as if nothing were the matter. But she knew it was the beginning of the end; she knew that this was the first small cut of the knife that was to wound her to the death.

"It's not good-bye, hang it all!" Paget protested loudly to his friend. "You're only half a mile away. We'll see you every day, eh, Marna? What about dining out somewhere to-morrow? Sunday's a putrid day in London."

Marna did not answer, and Hubbard said with an effort:

"I've got to work! I'll ring up in a day or two, if I may, and make some arrangement."

He said good-bye to Biddy and to the Big Flapper.

"I could *howl*!" Dolly Benson said. "And Mr. Hubbard doesn't mind leaving us a bit, I can see. I don't believe he's got a heart."

Hubbard hardly heard her, hardly saw her; his whole being was concentrated on the moment when he would have to say good-bye to Marna.

"I shall see her again," he thought fiercely. "It's nonsense to feel as if it's the end. Of course I shall see her again." But his face was white when at last he forced himself to turn to her.

Afterwards he wondered what he said—what she said—he supposed they shook hands—he supposed that he thanked her for her kindness in allowing him to stay so long, but he could not remember. It was as if someone had blotted out his self-possession and his memory, leaving only his heart which was seared with flame.

Then he followed George Paget into the waiting car. Harnigan slammed up the door and it was all over.

"I could *howl*!" said the Big Flapper again brokenly. She sat down forlornly on the stairs.

"Doesn't anyone want to howl except me?" she demanded, looking from Biddy to Marna.

"We're not all so silly," the Little Flapper answered with scorn, but her own heart was breaking and she dared not look at Marna—Marna who had turned quietly away and was going upstairs.

"Put on your hats, you two children," she said evenly, "and we'll go shopping. Dolly, there's nothing like a new hat to heal a broken heart. Come along, I'll treat you each to one."

Dolly sprang to her feet, her grief almost forgotten.

"You darling! How perfectly adorable of you! Come along, Biddy. Hurry!"

Marna went into her room and shut the door.

"He's gone," she said aloud with trembling lips, and then again, "he's gone."

Their only good-bye had been that handshake downstairs; they had not had a moment together since the night they drove to the Blairs'.

And in another ten days the width of the sea would be cutting their lives definitely apart. Marna put the thought determinedly from her. She dared not think of it yet. With shaking hands she began to dress.

No need to think of it yet—there were still ten whole days and nights left to them, and anything might happen in that time. And although he was no longer under the same roof with her, he was still close by—within easy reach. She could always go to him if she felt that she must—for ten days yet she need not feel that she had lost him.

She found herself standing before her open wardrobe.

Which coat should she wear? What did it matter? She was no longer dressing to please Hugh. What did anything matter?

With an effort she pulled herself together. Silly to give way. If she felt like this now, how would she feel when he had really gone? How would she feel when all of her passionate longing and prayers could not bring him back?

The Little Flapper came rapping at the door.

"We're ready, darling."

"So am I. I'm just coming."

But the Little Flapper cried out when she saw her.

"Oh, are you ill? You look so white."

Marna forced a laugh.

"Do I? What nonsense! Wait a moment." She went back to the dressing-table and found a little box of rouge and a hare's foot. More often lately than anyone guessed she had had to resort to some such make-up in order to hide her pallor. She smeared a little on her cheeks, rubbing it carefully in, then she powdered lightly over it.

"That better?" she asked, rejoining Biddy.

Biddy looked at her and flushed sensitively.

"It's rouge, isn't it?" she asked, amazed.

Marna raised her brows.

"Well, and why not?" she queried, almost angrily.

"Nothing, darling," said the Little Flapper humbly. "I didn't know you ever used it, that's all."



THE last ten days passed in a flash. No sooner was it morning than it was night—no sooner had the week begun than it was ended.

Hubbard dined with the Pagets three times—once at their house and twice at a restaurant when there were always others in the party—and Marna always had the feeling that even so, it was against his will, and that if George had not insisted they would not have seen him at all.

“I don’t care,” she told herself recklessly. “If he doesn’t care why should I?”

Renny Martin had left and gone to stay with some other friends. He was the type of man who always lived in other people’s houses.

“But I’m close by,” he told Marna meaningly when they parted. “I can come any time you want me.”

“I am never likely to want you,” Marna had been stung to reply, but he had only laughed.

“Oh, you can never tell,” he said easily.

He was with them on one occasion when they dined with Hubbard, and Marna had the feeling that he was there as her jailer, watching her every glance and every movement.

Mrs. Blair often came to the house during that last week.

“Why’s the old girl so fond of us all at once?” George Paget asked boyishly. “She never used to chase round so.”

"I like her," Marna answered. "She's kind."

"Oh, she's kind enough," her husband agreed. "And if you like her it's all right, of course. Doesn't seem to me that she's quite your sort though, don't cher know?"

"I'm fond of her," Marna said, and spoke truly.

There was something motherly in Mrs. Blair's bluntness; to anyone she liked she could be a sure shield against the world. And her shrewd eyes saw more than Marna suspected. She had suffered sufficiently herself to recognize the signs of suffering in others, and in many little ways she tried to protect Marna and help her, even going so far on one occasion to warn Paget against Renny Martin.

"Why is that man always hanging round on your heels?" she demanded bluntly.

Paget looked surprised and a little confused.

"D'ye mean Martin?" he asked.

"Of course I do. I don't like the man. He's got crooked eyes."

"Don't like him myself," Paget confessed.

"But he's a friend of Marna's."

"Nonsense. Marna hates him," Mrs. Blair protested bluntly.

Paget dropped his eyeglass in surprise.

"Hates him! She always says yes if the fellow suggests coming with us anywhere."

"She hates him, all the same."

Paget took some time to digest this fact.

"Marna never hates anyone," he said at last, very solemnly.

Mrs. Blair twisted her big dog collar necklace impatiently.

"If you didn't use that absurd monocle so often you'd see more," she told him severely.

She let the subject drop, but her words stayed in his mind.

When he got an opportunity he spoke of it to Marna.

"I'm getting a bit fed up with Martin always on the spot," was his way of beginning the subject.

He could not be sure, but he thought Marna lost colour a little.

"He's quite harmless," she said lightly.

"May be harmless," Paget agreed, gaining courage, "but I don't like the chap. Bores me! Got no brains! If you like I'll give him the tip that we prefer his room to his company, don't cher know."

He was sure now that Marna paled though she turned her face quickly away.

"Don't be such an old silly," she said, trying to laugh. "You can't treat friends like that."

"Is he a friend?" Paget inquired darkly. He had no reason for that exact intonation of voice, but nevertheless he was rather proud of it.

To his amazement Marna turned on him with angry eyes.

"What do you mean?" she demanded sharply.

"If you've got anything to say against him——"

"Good heavens, Marna!" Paget was thunder-struck; he had never seen his wife so upset. "What in the world's the matter? I just made a harmless remark, eh, what? Never meant anything. If you like the fellow, well and good—what's right for you is right for me, you know that, my dear."

"I *do* like him," Marna said defiantly.

It was not the truth, but she dared not admit the truth; she felt that she was a prisoner, with the eyes of all the world watching to see that she did not escape.

That was late on Saturday night after they had returned from a dance and dinner at one of the newest night clubs.

The Little Flapper had gone to her room, and Marna was sitting by the fireside still in her evening wraps.

Paget fidgeted about, conscious that in some inexplicable way he was out of favour, and yet entirely at a loss to know how to account for it. He looked at Marna from time to time in boyish perplexity, then suddenly he crossed the room to her.

"You're tired. Let me take your cloak." But instead of taking it from her, he encircled her with his arms. "What's the matter, my darling?"

To his amazement she started up, breaking away from him, the soft fur cloak slipping from her shoulders to the floor between them. There was a little wild look in her eyes and her breath came fast as if she were frightened or hurt.

"Don't—don't touch me," she said sharply. "Oh, if you would only go away and leave me."

Her nerves were at snapping point; the evening had been one long torment.

She felt as if she were under sentence of death, and as if every moment ticked away a precious heart-beat.

She had avoided Hubbard deliberately; she had refused to dance with him, and when he asked why she had answered flippantly:

" Well, I've got to get used to being without you, so I may as well begin now."

She had to be cruel to hide her pain; in some strange way it helped her to know she was hurting him.

But when he had gone the pendulum swung the other way.

Another evening had slipped through her hands and she had not tried to hold it or make the most of the little it offered her.

Coming home in the car she had pleaded a headache and let the Little Flapper talk to George Paget. She had sat huddled into her corner, her hands clenched and her eyes shut tightly.

" Only three more days ! Only three more days ! "

Every movement of the car, every purring sound of its engine had seemed to sing the same song.

" Only three more days. Only three more days——"

The boat sailed on Wednesday, and then—that was all, she could see nothing beyond.

But the touch of her husband's gentle hands had seemed to break down the iron band with which she had bound herself; it was as if he had cut the taut string of her nerves, allowing them to vibrate and scream without control of any sort.

She stood looking at him with wild eyes, shivering and shaking, like an animal who fears the whip.

" Good God, Marna ! "

Paget was frightened and angered. She had looked at him almost as if she hated him; she had sprung away from his caresses as if they were loathsome to her. His wife, the woman for whom he

would gladly have given his life and everything he possessed.

With a great effort Marna pulled herself together; she tried to laugh. With shaking hands she pushed the hair back from her forehead.

"It's only—oh, it's only——" she began with white lips, then the terrible feeling of collapse conquered her, and she would have fallen but for Paget's arms.

He laid her down on the bed and rushed to the Little Flapper's room.

"Marna's ill—faint. Come quickly, Biddy!"

Biddy was standing at the looking glass brushing her short, soft hair. She had slipped out of her frock and looked very little and childish in her short petticoat and tiny bodice with its ribbon shoulder straps, but there was motherly tenderness and understanding in her eyes as she pushed Paget unceremoniously aside and fled to Marna.

"Get water—quick!—and brandy. No, we don't want a doctor and we don't want any of the maids poking round."

But Marna was only unconscious for a few minutes. Before George Paget was back again she had opened her eyes and was trying to sit up.

"It's all right, darling." Biddy was smoothing her hair and holding her hand. "You fainted. You're tired out, of course. It's all right."

"Don't leave me, Biddy. I only want you. Don't leave me."

"I won't. Not for a single minute. I promise."

The Little Flapper stood her ground stoutly against George when he returned.

"I'm going to stay with her. You must go and sleep in the dressing-room to-night."

He stared down at her, frightened and angry, a brandy decanter in one hand and a jug of water in the other.

"If you think I'm going to be ordered out of my own room by you, you're mistaken," he blustered. "Marna would rather have me with her than you, wouldn't you, Marna?"

"Don't worry her. She's not well enough to be worried," Biddy implored.

Marna turned her face into the pillow and began to sob.

"Oh, leave me alone. Please leave me alone. I'm so tired."

"Marna——"

The Little Flapper took Paget forcibly by the arm and dragged him out of the room, shutting the door firmly upon him.

"Don't be so *selfish*!" she said.

But the tears were running down her face as she came back to Marna.

Selfish! how could she have been so cruel? He had never been selfish in all his life; he hardly knew the meaning of the word.

But for once in his life, George Paget was offended. He got up early the next morning and without waiting to see his wife, he went round to the hotel where Hugh Hubbard was staying. Hubbard was up and breakfasting in the dining-room, and Paget sat down beside him at the table and began to unfold his troubles.

"Marna was ill when we got home last night. Fainted—the same sort of faint as before. You

remember, eh? the night you came home, wasn't it? Well, she fainted again. I tell you I don't like the look of it. She'll have to see a specialist. Never fainted in her life before, and all about nothing this time. I was just talking to her about Martin—told her I didn't like the fellow—and she got positively angry, don't cher know!" He sighed heavily and moved his long legs into an easier position. "Do *you* like Renny Martin?" he demanded.

"Not particularly."

Paget looked pleased.

"Glad to hear it. Chap's all right. I never minded him till lately, but he does hang about Marna so. Not that I'm suggesting anything against her, don't think that, but of course I know you won't, but between you and me and the gate-post, I believe the blackguard rather prides himself that she—oh, you know what I mean."

"Yes." Hubbard pushed his plate away. "Go on," he said hardily.

"Nothing more to say," Paget admitted. "I just told her I didn't want him about the place so much, and I don't! I'll break the head of any man who comes hanging round my wife!" He brought his fist down heavily on the table. "You'd do the same, wouldn't you, if Marna was your wife, eh, what?" he demanded.

Hubbard smiled faintly.

"Yes."

"Well, there you are then!" Paget said contentedly. He leaned back more comfortably in his chair. "That was all that happened and Marna fainted."



"Overtired! Too many late nights!"

"I know. That's what I think." Paget let his monocle fall with an agitated click. "Queer part of it is, she turned round on me. That's what I can't understand. It hurt, I can tell you. We've always been so happy together—never a word, or a misunderstanding. It hurt, I can tell you," he repeated, his handsome face flushed at the memory of the look in Marna's eyes. "If I thought there was anything between Marna and that scoundrel Martin——"

"George, for God's sake——"

With an effort Paget controlled himself.

"Sorry. All rot, of course. Marna's the best woman in the world, but women *do* like Martin, confound him! Look at the women he's had, and boasts about——"

"Not women like—like your wife."

"I know. Forget I said that, will you, old chap?"

"Of course."

The dining-room was empty save for the two men and a waiter away at the far end, and Hubbard laid his hand on his friend's arm.

"We men don't understand women perhaps," he said with an effort. "We've just got to be—kind—and humour them——" His voice broke. Kind! what a poor, inadequate word for all he longed to do.

"I know." Paget softened at once. "That's it. We just don't understand 'em."

"Take her away for a holiday. She likes travelling." Every word was a growing difficulty to Hubbard.

Paget's handsome face brightened.

" Rippin' idea. Did her a lot of good before when she was ill. Took her to the South of France then. Wonder where she'd like to go this time? "

" Well, there are heaps of places she hasn't seen."

Paget laughed suddenly.

" I know! we'll take a trip out to Shanghai to see you."

Hubbard made a convulsive movement, knocking over the cup at his elbow, and in the following excitement the suggestion was left unanswered. But the idea stayed in Paget's mind. He thought it a most excellent plan; he thought Marna would be delighted.

" So you're really going on Wednesday? " he said presently.

" Yes."

" We'll miss you, old chap."

" I shall miss you, too. I shall think of the good times we've had together when I get back—out there."

" When will you be home again? "

" I don't know. Not for some years, at any rate."

" We shall come and see you off, of course."

Hubbard frowned.

" I'm going down the night before," he said abruptly.

" The night before? "

" Yes. I hate good-byes. One feels such a damned fool standing about waiting for a train or a boat to go, so I've arranged to go down the night before."

" Have you told Marna? "

" No, why should I? "

" No reason. I only thought—well, do as you

like of course. It's your funeral, anyway, don't cher know!" Paget was feeling almost happy again. He liked those words of Hugh Hubbard's.

"We men don't understand women perhaps. We've just got to be kind—and humour them."

He could be kind all right. It was no trouble to be kind to a woman whom one adored.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "I wish you'd have a talk to Marna before you go. Would you? You're a sensible chap and she likes you. Just get her to promise to go and see a specialist, will you? She will listen to you where perhaps she'd only laugh at me. Just tell her I'm anxious—I *am* anxious about her, beastly anxious, don't cher know? Tell her I'd do anything in the world for her—give her anything she wants if she'll only say what it is. Tell her that, will you? It'll come better from you than from anyone else. You're my friend. Eh? what d'ye say?"

"My dear chap—interference——"

"Rot! you're too tactful to let it sound like interference. Marna understands you, too—she seems to understand all of us," poor Paget said with a stifled sigh. "Wish I understood her half as well as she understands me, eh what? Look here"—he beamed suddenly—"what about to-day? Why not take her out to lunch? It's an off day Sunday—nothing to do. I'll take the Little Flapper to the Zoo. There's a new monkey there she wants to see—awfully keen on monkeys, Biddy is. You can have the two-seater and take Marna for a run out somewhere. Do her good! Stay out to lunch and don't hurry back——"

"I can't—I've got lots of things that must be attended to."

Paget's handsome face fell.

"Look here," he said bluntly, "what's up between you and me? Things have been queer ever since I was ass enough to make that suggestion about Dolly Benson. Know you said you weren't offended, but you've been different since. Look here, Hugh——"

"Rubbish! I'm not offended. Never was."

"Well then, do this for me, will you? Take Marna out! Dare say she's fed up with me, and she likes you, as I said just now. It would really be doing me a real kindness. You can have the two-seater."

"My dear old chap, I don't want to borrow your car."

"Don't be so damned independent. What's mine is yours."

Hubbard winced and looked away, trying to laugh.

"Isn't that rather a rash statement?"

"It's the truth. Haven't we always shared? Well, there you are then! I think more of you than anyone else in the world—except Marna, of course. So that's settled. I'll be getting along now. Haven't seen Marna this morning yet. What time'll you come along? Make it soon—before lunch. It's a tophole day, and it will do you both good to get a run in the country. Keep Marna out as long as you can. I'll be all right. Biddy and I'll go and see the monkeys. I'll tell Harnigan to get the two-seater round in half an hour."

"But——"

"Not a word. Won't hear a word. I'll run

along," and Paget ran along, smiling happily once more, confident that he had settled everything most tactfully and satisfactorily.

Hubbard was the best chap in the world, and could be counted upon to smooth away any little trouble that might have arisen in Marna's imagination. For, after all, what could it be but imagination? Paget knew that never once had he willingly said or done anything that would cause Marna a moment's happiness.

He went back home and up to his wife's room.

She was dressed and sitting by the window, and she turned with an effort when he opened the door and smiled.

"Hullo, darlin'!" Paget went forward and, bending, kissed her. "Forgiven me?" he asked.

She leaned her head against his arm with a little sigh.

"Forgiven you? For what?"

"Being a clumsy ass last night. Serve me right if you didn't speak to me again. 'Pon my word, I don't know what made me say what I did about that chap Martin."

"It's all right. Don't let us speak of it any more."

Paget agreed heartily.

"No, we won't waste a thought on the fellow." He smoothed her hair with his big hands. "Feelin' all right?"

"Quite, thank you. Only a little lazy."

"A run in the country'd do you good. Lovely out this mornin'. How'd you like a run in the country?"

"Anything you like. We might go after lunch." Paget chuckled.

"I'm not going at all. Biddy and I are going to the Zoo to see the new monkey. Hugh's coming along to take you out." Marna's hands closed convulsively over the arms of her chair. "I suggested it," her husband went on blissfully. "He'll soon be gone, so we might as well see as much of him as we can. Decent chap, Hugh, eh? You like him, don't you?"

"Very much."

"Good. Well, he'll be round in an hour. I've told Harnigan to get the two-seater ready. Have a run down into Surrey. It's a topping morning."

"Why don't you come too?—you and Biddy?"

"No. We'll stay at home. Sick of motoring! Be a change to toddle round the Zoo."

"Very well."

He bent and kissed her again.

"Well, make yourself look pretty," he said.

Marna laughed.

"You evidently believe in preparing the lamb for the slaughter," she said in a hard little voice.

Paget frowned.

"Don't you want to go?" he asked anxiously.

"Thought it would do you good to get away from me for a bit."

To his amazement the tears started to Marna's eyes.

"You're much too kind to me," she said, choking.

He flushed like a delighted schoolboy.

"Nonsense! Not half kind enough. You get strong and well again like you used to be, and I'll be the happiest man on earth."

"I am quite strong."

"Well, make yourself look pretty," he urged again, and went out of the room whistling cheerily.

Marna sat very still for a moment, her hands clasped in her lap. So it had come. The day for which she had longed and yet dreaded. Fate, or George, or Hugh, or all three of them together, had decreed that this was to be the breaking point of her life.

In a few hours—with the end of the day—everything else would end also.

She closed her eyes with a little sick shudder.

"If only it could be the end of my life too," she thought wildly.

Then with a determined effort she put the thought from her. Hours still lay before her. Like Eve, she was still to have her taste of Paradise before she heard its gates clanging against her. And the sun was shining, and the air was soft and mild. Marna put on her prettiest frock and a new hat, then she went along to Biddy's room.

"I'm going out," she said. She tried to add, "With Mr. Hubbard," but somehow she could not. Biddy turned.

"I know, darling. Uncle George has just told me. He and I are going to the Zoo when we've had lunch."

The two girls looked at one another for a moment, then Biddy put her arms round Marna and hugged her.

"I hope you'll have a lovely ride, darling."

"It's a lovely morning," Marna said. She drew away from the girl's warm clasp and looked at herself in the mirror. "Do I look nice?" she asked wistfully.

"You look beautiful."

But both their hearts were aching, and when presently George Paget called up the stairs to his wife, Biddy stayed where she was and let Marna go down alone.

The two men were standing at the open door, and they both turned as Marna joined them.

"George thinks it will be good for us to have a day in the country together," Hubbard said. He tried to speak lightly, but his voice was constrained. "Are you going to be very self-sacrificing and come?"

"It seems that we have both got to do as we are told," Marna answered with an effort.

"Master of the house, you know," Paget said delightedly. "Must do as the master of the house orders! But no furious driving, mind," he counselled.

He stood at the door till the little two-seater had turned out of the drive and disappeared down the road, then he went back into the house and shouted for Biddy.

"Where are you, Biddy? I want you."

After a moment Biddy came racing downstairs.

"Here I am. What's the matter, Uncle George?"

Paget put an arm round the Little Flapper's waist.

"Nothing, except that I feel lonely. Hate my own company, don't cher know."

Biddy squeezed his hand.

"Never mind, we'll have a lovely time with the monkeys," she said.

He laughed and tilted her face up by its little round chin, then his face changed.

"You've been cryin'," he accused her.

Biddy flushed scarlet.



"I haven't!" she quickly denied.

But he was not deceived.

"What's the matter with everyone?" he demanded disconsolately. "Last night Marna was upset, and to-day you're upset."

Biddy squeezed his big arm affectionately.

"Never mind," she said. "You're never upset, that's one merciful thing. I don't know what we should do if you weren't always just a perfect darling."

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XI*

TO the two racing along through the morning sunshine speech seemed an impossibility.

"I *will* be happy to-day, just for to-day," Marna was telling herself determinedly. "I'll forget everything except that we are together. I'll forget to-morrow and all the to-morrows——"

But she found that she could not.

Every purr of the running engine seemed to be ticking off another precious moment of life—every milestone they passed was but a fresh reminder that this was a last journey which yet led to nowhere.

Then Hubbard said with an effort :

"Haven't you anything to say to me, Marna?"

She looked at him for the first time.

"Did you want to come?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No. George forced it upon me. I tried to refuse."

She flushed sensitively and paled as swiftly.

"We can go back if you wish to," she said with stiff lips.

"You know I don't wish to. You know—oh, what's the use of saying anything?"

She was silent for a moment, then she said painfully:

"We might at least try and be happy. We might make the most of our last day."

"Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die, in fact, is that it?" he asked harshly.

He slowed the car down a little.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

"I don't care. It's all the same to me."

"Poor little girl."

The tears sprang to her eyes.

"I don't want you to be sorry for me," she said tremulously. "It's your fault I'm unhappy."

"Marna!"

"So it is," she accused him passionately. "You don't have to leave me alone. You don't *have* to go away; you're only going because you want to go."

He did not answer for a moment, then he said quietly:

"Would you come away with me if I asked you to?"

"I—I——" She tried to answer, tried to speak one of the many passionate words clamouring at her lips, but she could not, and Hubbard said again:

"Would you come away with me if I asked you to?"

"No."

He drew a hard breath.

"Then what else is there left for me but to leave you?"

They drove some way in silence, till Marna asked:

"Why did George send you out with me?"

"He wanted me to speak to you. He thinks you are ill. He tells me you fainted again last night."

Marna shivered.

"I'm not ill, and anyway there is no need for him to worry you about me."

"Don't you think I worry about you as it is?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

Much as she longed to be kind to him, and to have the memory of this day to store up as an entirely happy one, it seemed a physical impossibility.

Her nerves were on edge; they felt like a ragged piece of fine cloth torn by a ruthless hand.

"At any rate you will soon be out of it all," she said. She saw the blood beat up into his face, and the grim set of his jaw, but when presently he spoke it was with infinite gentleness.

"Don't quarrel with me, Marna. It will hurt us both so terribly afterwards."

She looked away from him, her eyes blinded with tears.

"Well, you need not leave me," were the words which rose again to her lips, but she did not speak them.

She knew he was right to leave her; she knew that nothing but parting remained to them.

What other course could they take? how could she ever leave George and break his heart?

They were outside London now, running through

a little straggling town towards which the great city was just beginning to stretch its greedy arms.

An old ivy-covered church was gradually being hemmed in by new and ugly villas, upon which it seemed to be looking down from its crumbling tower with worried amazement.

As they drove slowly by the clock struck twelve.

Marna glanced up at it with a little shiver.

Midday already!

The time was flying so fast, and as yet she had made no effort to fill in the hours with memories that could never be forgotten.

With sudden impulse she moved a little closer to Hubbard, and slipped her hand through his arm.

"I'm so sorry, Hugh," she said with a sob.

Hubbard tried to answer. She saw his lips move, but no words came. They went on and out into the country.

"There's an hotel farther along—the other side of Crawley," Hubbard said presently. "It's got rather a fine garden. We might have lunch there. I'm afraid it will be rather crowded as it's Sunday, but I don't know of any other place unless you do."

"I don't mind where it is. At any rate we shall be together."

He pressed her hand closer to him.

It was nearly one o'clock when they reached Burford Bridge.

"Another hour gone," Marna said. "I don't think I want anything to eat, Hugh."

"You ought to have a wonderful appetite on a morning like this," he answered.

He tried to speak cheerily, but he dared not look at

her. He drove the car into the hotel yard. There were a dozen others there.

"I'm afraid the place will be crowded," he said discontentedly. "If you know of any other place——"

"It doesn't matter. Let's go and see the garden."

She slipped her hand through his arm, and he looked down at her with a sad little smile.

"Supposing we meet someone we know?"

"I don't care if we do."

The garden was beautiful. There were wide, undulating lawns closely mown, tall trees with spreading shady branches, and beds of scarlet geraniums that made a wonderful splash of colour against the emerald background.

There were tables and chairs at one end and a few people scattered about. Hubbard and Marna walked away to the far end of the garden where a slow river ran by at the bottom of a steep bank, and the grass was allowed to grow long and tangled.

They sat down on a rustic bench under a pollard willow whose supple branches drooped right down to the earth, making a partial screen from the rest of the garden.

Hubbard took Marna's hand in both his own and raised it to his lips.

"It would have been kinder to each other if we had not come," he said.

"I know." Then suddenly she broke out passionately. "Hugh, what am I going to do when you are gone? What am I going to do?"

"That is what I am asking myself night and day, day and night, and I can't find the answer. It's all

so horrible—so impossible.” For a moment he seemed to lose his self-control. “If George were a different man—— Marna, I’ve often wished that he was a drunken brute who knocked you about so that there might be an excuse for us—something!—anything!—but as it is, we both know he’s the best fellow on earth.”

“I know, but that doesn’t help. I think it even makes things worse.” She began to sob, tearlessly, and Hubbard said angrily:

“Don’t. I can’t bear it if you cry. We’ve got to be brave. We’ve just got to face what we know must be. Others have had to do it before us. It’s life—at least, I suppose it’s life. We must try and believe that some day things will come right; we must try and fix our thoughts on that hope—you will try, won’t you, Marna?”

“How can I, when I know that nothing can ever come right.”

“But you must try,” he insisted fiercely. “We must both try. Don’t make it harder for me. How do you think I shall feel when I’m hundreds of miles away from you if I can’t force myself to believe that you’re happy——”

“*Happy!*”

“Oh, I know, I know—but what can I do? I’m powerless. It’s just that we’re not meant for one another, I suppose——”

“Oh, don’t say that.”

“I only mean that Fate won’t give us to one another—I mean—— Marna, can’t you see that I’m trying to build up some sort of a defence for myself, trying to find some argument that will

help?" He released her hand suddenly and rose to his feet. "What's the use of talking, anyway? It's got to be faced. We've got to say good-bye. Oh, my dear, do you think because I can't say everything that is in my heart that I'm not longing to say it? Do you think I want to leave you? Don't you think the thought of the future is unutterable hell to me?"

"You're free," Marna said with white lips, "and I'm tied. Some day you will meet another woman, and then——"

"No one will ever take your place in my heart."

"There are more ways than one of loving."

"If you're trying to hurt me——"

"I'm not. I'm only trying to make myself realize what *may* happen." Marna's hands were clasped in her lap to hide their trembling, and she sat staring away from him across the garden to the beds of flaming geraniums. "I'm trying to make myself realize that perhaps some day someone will say to me: 'Hugh Hubbard's going to be married.'" She forced her eyes to his face. "After all, you've got a perfect right to marry," she said. "I'm married. Why shouldn't you be?"

"Because in my heart and in my thoughts you are my wife, and always will be."

She laughed brokenly.

"That's how you feel about me now, but some day—after two years—three years——" she broke off, biting her lip hard. "Nobody ever expects a man to be faithful for years," she said defiantly, after a moment.

"Whatever I say you won't believe me. Only the years can prove it to you."

"I don't want to go on living for years. I should like to die the day you go away."

She was utterly reckless in her misery. It seemed impossible to do or say anything that would not torture either herself or him. Before he could answer she rose to her feet with a quick movement. There was a feverish colour in her cheeks and her eyes were too bright.

"Let's eat and be merry, anyway," she said with a sudden change of voice. "As you say, to-morrow we die—or at least, to be quite correct, on Wednesday we die, or at least I do."

She turned to walk back to the hotel and Hubbard followed. Useless to say anything, he knew.

They went to the hotel and ordered lunch.

The long dining-room was full of happy, laughing people.

"I wonder what they're all so happy about," Marna said.

A girl and a man lunching together at a table close by attracted her attention. They seemed so utterly content and satisfied with one another.

"Do you think they are married?" she asked, pointing them out to Hugh.

"I don't know."

"She hasn't got a wedding ring on," Marna said pathetically, and then again: "She's rather like what I used to be before I was married. Her hair, I mean. . . . I once had a brown frock like hers, too."

They made a poor pretence of lunching.



"I don't want anything more—food chokes me," Marna said. "Let's go out again, Hugh. I can't breathe here."

He paid the bill and they walked back to the car through the garden.

"The geraniums are wonderfully fine, aren't they?" he said vaguely.

It was something to say; something ordinary to keep his thoughts for one moment from the heart-breaking good-bye which was so near at hand.

"I used to love them," Marna answered, "but I shall always hate them now. Horrible, glaring, unsympathetic things."

They went out to the car.

A man was bending interestedly over the bonnet; when he heard Hubbard's voice he turned, and it was Renny Martin. A little spark flashed through his eyes as he came forward.

"Thought I recognized the car," he said lightly.

"How are you, Marna?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And you, Hubbard?"

"All right, thanks."

"Have you lunched?"

"Yes, we're just off."

"Paget not here?"

"No."

Questions and replies were all curt and constrained, but Martin was smiling with apparent unconcern.

"Let me see, you're off on Wednesday?" he asked.

"Yes."

Marna had moved a pace or two away from them

and was looking up at the sky. It had clouded over, and a few large drops of rain were falling.

She turned to Hubbard.

"Oughtn't we to start? It's going to rain."

"I'm coming now."

Hugh nodded good-bye to Martin.

"I'm going back to town," Martin said. "May look in at Regent's Park. If I do I'll tell Paget we met."

"Yes, do tell him," Hubbard said.

"Do you think that fellow followed us here?" he asked as he and Marna drove away.

"Oh, no, why should he?"

"I don't trust him. He's got shifty eyes."

"He can't do us any harm, Hugh."

"I know, but I think he would like to. Marna, will you tell me something?"

"Yes."

"Is that fellow in love with you?"

"He pretends that he is."

"*Pretends!*"

"You know how many women he has had in his life."

Hubbard pressed the accelerator with his foot, sending the car forward at a great pace.

"And I've got to go away and leave you to men like that."

She laughed faintly.

"You're not going to pretend to be jealous of him, Hugh?"

"I'm jealous of every man who comes near you."

"You need not be," she said sadly.

The rain was falling heavily now, splashing on

to the window of the little car, and running down the glass in tiny streaks.

A few miles farther on Hubbard drew into the side of the road, where the hedge was high and thick, and tall old trees formed a shelter.

"We'll wait a little while and see if it clears," he said.

The sunshine had quite gone, and the afternoon looked grey and dreary.

They sat in silence for some moments, then Hubbard turned in his seat, leaning his arm on the wheel, and looked at Marna.

"This is the last time you and I will be alone," he said with an effort. "And there are so many things I want to say to you."

"Yes."

She was quite white, but her voice was steady.

He put his hand over hers as they were clasped in her lap and held them.

"First of all, you are to take care of yourself—to take great care of yourself. Oh, yes, I know what you're going to say," he said quickly as she would have spoken. "But it's for my sake I am asking this—not only for your own. Your life belongs to me more than it does to anyone, because we love each other, and so, as your life is my property, you must take care of it for me, Marna."

"Yes."

"Will you promise me?"

"I——"

"Promise me?"

"Very well."

She spoke indifferently, looking away from him.

In her mind she was thinking how silly it all was, as if life mattered! As if it mattered at all whether one's poor body went on moving about the earth when its heart and all that was best was dead.

Hubbard went on:

"Then—about what you said just now—I mean, about my getting married." He felt a quick movement of her hands, and his grasp of them tightened. "Don't believe it, Marna, no matter who tells you. If such a thing should ever happen I will tell you myself, and before anyone else knows. Never mind what you hear, don't believe it unless I write and tell you myself."

She looked at him with a flicker of hope in her eyes.

"Are you going to write to me, Hugh?"

"No."

She caught her breath on a little cry of pain.

"Never at all?"

"No. Marna, how can I? What could I say?"

"You might say: 'Dear Mrs. Paget, I hope you are quite well!'" she told him with weary mirth. "Nobody could object to that."

He made no reply and the silence was unbroken save for the patter of the rain on the closed windows.

"Is there anything else you want me to promise?" she asked bitterly after a moment.

"Yes. You've got to promise me to be brave. Will you, Marna? To try and be happy—to——" He broke off, looking at her with passionate eyes, then suddenly he leaned forward and took her in his arms. "Oh, my dear, my dear——" he said brokenly.

She hid her face against his shoulder.

"It's no use making me promise anything," she whispered hopelessly. "You know that I shan't care what happens to me when you've gone."

"You won't always feel like that. Oh, my God, do you think I want to know that you'll be suffering as much as I shall?"

She made no answer; she just lay very still in the circle of his arm. She hardly listened when he spoke to her; she could only hear the mocking voice in her own heart that said over and over again: "This is the end. The last time you will ever be with him—the last time you will ever feel his arm round you—the last time your head will ever rest on his shoulder. It's all over—this is the end—the very end."

She did not know how the time passed, she was not conscious of returning his kisses, she was not conscious of anything except that mocking voice: "This is the end—this is the very end——"

When after a long time Hubbard said: "We must go back, Marna," she raised herself at once, and picked up her hat which had fallen off.

"I suppose I'm very untidy," she said, and when he made no reply she said again: "Am I very untidy, Hugh?"

It was like talking in one's sleep; she had all the vague, semi-detached feeling of a dreamer; it was only when she saw the white tragedy of Hubbard's face that a sharp realization of what this really meant came crashing home to her. They had said their good-bye—everything was at an end.

She gave a sharp cry and put out both shaking hands, clutching at his coat.

“Hugh! Hugh!”

For a moment she felt that she must die. It seemed impossible that she could go on living. As in a dream she heard him speaking to her, soothing her, saying comforting things that gave no real comfort, begging her for his sake—for both their sakes—for George’s sake——

Then the moment of madness passed, and she struggled up to sane self-control once more to find that they were driving back to London, and that the rain had ceased and a watery sun was shining apologetically from behind the clouds.

“It’s not raining any more,” she said.

He made no comment and she said again stupidly :

“It’s not raining now, Hugh.”

“No, my dear.”

She looked at him with apathetic eyes.

There was something almost ugly in the hard lines of his face and the set fold of his lips—something that made her afraid.

They hardly spoke again till they reached London, and then just as they were turning into Regent’s Park someone shouted to them from the pathway, and it was George Paget and the Little Flapper.

Marna caught at Hugh Hubbard’s arm.

“Hugh——” she said pitifully.

The car had run on a few paces, and before he stopped it to wait for the two on the path Hubbard took Marna’s hand in a hard grip,

“God bless you for ever and ever, my best beloved,” he said hoarsely.

And then it was all over, and the Little Flapper was at the door of the car, all flushed and breathless,

rattling on about the new monkey which she had fed with nuts, and how it had snatched at George Paget's eyeglass.

"By Jove, it was a near squeak," Paget said boyishly. "Hanged if I know what I should have done if the little beggar had really got it, eh, Marna?"

Then they went back home and George asked Hugh to come in and stay to dinner, and Hugh refused, and then presently he went away, and that was all.

Monday dragged by, and on Tuesday Marna and her husband went to lunch with Hugh Hubbard.

There was another man there who Marna did not know, and the conversation was chiefly of Shanghai and of business.

Marna sat next to the third man, whose name was Saunders.

"Do you know Shanghai?" she asked him, and he told her that he had lived out there for some time.

"Came home when I got married," he said.

"Oh!"

"My sister's going out on the same boat as Hubbard," he volunteered.

"Oh!" Marna felt as if someone had touched her heart with rough fingers. "Is your sister married, too?" she asked.

"No, she's only a youngster—twenty-six."

"Oh!"

"Hugh's going to look after her for me," Saunders said with a laugh. "Ought to have a good time on the boat, don't you think, Mrs. Paget?"

"Yes."

Six weeks together. The thought was a knife

turning slowly in Marna's heart. For the first time she knew what jealousy, cruel, biting jealousy really meant.

Across the table she met Hubbard's eyes. He read her thoughts, she knew, and the burning colour raced to her face. She hated him to know that she was jealous, it made her feel ashamed.

When lunch was over he came to her, but she deliberately walked away from him.

It was more than she could bear, that he should be sorry for her, that he should perhaps try to tell her there was no need for her to feel hurt.

She avoided shaking hands with him when she and George went away; she got into the waiting car and leaned back in a corner.

That night at dinner she asked as indifferently as she could:

"What time shall we have to leave to-morrow, George?"

Paget looked at her across the table.

"Where are we goin'?" he asked.

Marna winced.

"Why—I thought—aren't we going to see Hugh off?"

There was a little silence; Paget's eyes fell.

"He's gone——" he said awkwardly.

"Gone!"

Her husband fidgeted with his monocle.

"He's gone down to-night. Had some business to settle or something—forgot exactly what he said."

"I didn't say good-bye to him."

Marna wondered if it was really she who spoke in that quiet, emotionless voice.



The Little Flapper dared not raise her eyes, and Marna said again :

" I think you might have told me, or *he* might have told me ! What made him decide to go to-night ? "

" He spoke about it some days ago, but it wasn't settled. Only knew myself after lunch to-day. "

Marna's eyes burned.

" Why didn't you tell me ? "

" Never occurred to me. Suppose I ought to have told you—sorry, my dear. "

He did not like to say that Hugh had asked him not to tell her.

" I abominate good-byes, " so Hubbard had said.

" I'll just slip off without telling anyone. Back me up, there's a good chap ! Marna will understand. Tell her I said I knew she would understand. "

Marna took a cigarette from the box at her elbow, and lit it carefully.

" It makes no difference, " she said very quietly.

" I suppose he disliked the idea of good-byes and a crowd seeing him off. "

" Rotten business saying good-bye, " Paget agreed.

He was relieved to have got out of it so easily ; in his own mind he had not felt quite comfortable about it. Marna might easily have cut up rough—after all, she and Hubbard had been good friends—they had always liked each other he knew, and was glad of it.

He looked across at his wife with adoring eyes. She was a woman in a thousand ; the sweetest—the most desirable.

And in her heart Marna was saying to herself in heartbroken panic, " And I never said good-bye to him—I wouldn't even let him speak to me. "

"What time does the boat sail, George?" she asked.

Paget shook his head.

"Not sure—depends on the tides. About five I should think. Why do you want to know?"

"I only thought we might send him a wire to the boat."

"Good idea," Paget agreed heartily. "I'll send one to-night, so it's sure to be in time."

He went off to the library, and Marna and the Little Flapper were left alone.

Biddy tried to think of something to say, but she felt tongue-tied and stupid. She looked at Marna, and was amazed at her composure.

"These are horrid cigarettes," Marna said with a little grimace. She laid hers down on the ash-tray. "Run up to my room and fetch mine, will you, Biddy?"

The Little Flapper hurried away, glad to escape, and Marna rose quickly and rang the bell.

"Gone! And I never said good-bye to him!" She kept saying the words over and over again to herself, but they hardly touched her, they seemed to be quite senseless. Her heart was like a stone in her breast, and she felt cold from head to foot, almost like a dead woman.

When the maid came into the room, Marna was standing with her hand resting on a chair back, her face as white as the gown she wore.

"Oh, aren't you well, Ma'am?" the girl asked anxiously.

Marna laughed.

"Oh yes, quite well, thank you. I only wanted—"

Is Harnigan anywhere in the house, do you know? "

" I think he's still in the garage, Madam. Shall I see? "

" No thank you. I'll go myself."

" I think it's raining, Madam," the girl said, but Marna walked out of the room without answering.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XII*

THE Little Flapper was coming slowly downstairs with the cigarettes when Marna crossed the hall and took down one of her husband's coats from the rack.

" It's raining hard, darling," were the words which rose to Biddy's lips, but something restrained her from uttering them. There was something so strange about Marna's manner, something almost secretive, when after a moment she turned to a side door which was seldom used, and which led out into the garden. The bolts were stiff, but Marna struggled with them till they slid resistingly back, then she opened the door, letting in a whirl of wind and petulant rain. For a moment she stood irresolute, then slipped out, dragging the door to again behind her with difficulty.

The Little Flapper came down the remaining stairs with a rush. She put the cigarettes down on a table and turned impulsively towards the library. George Paget was there, she knew, and even as her fingers touched the door handle she heard his deep unmusical

voice burst out into a snatch of song from some popular comedy :

" I'm a little bit fonder of you than of myself, I am!  
Just a little bit fonder of you than of myself, I *am!* "

There was a loud roar of insistence on the last word, and as she listened Biddy's fingers slipped from the door handle.

How could she rush in and tell him the thing which was shaking her heart to its very foundations, and trembling on her lips? He was so utterly happy and unsuspecting. It would be like striking a child across its smiling face to say : " Marna's gone out. You must stop her. I know where she's gone—she means to follow Mr. Hubbard."

Biddy really believed that was what Marna intended. She was shaking from head to foot as she stood there, not knowing what to do for the best. Then suddenly she made up her mind. She would follow Marna herself and stop her.

In her excitement and dread she forgot to take a coat, and her thin frock was drenched before she had gone more than a few steps down the wet garden path.

There was an archway with a lamp over it which led to the garage, and by its light Biddy caught a fleeting glimpse of Marna's figure.

She was going to the garage!

" One good thing she can't drive a car herself, poor darling," Biddy told herself with a sob as she crept after her.

Harnigan was in the yard washing down the small car, and the Little Flapper saw his start of surprise

when his mistress appeared. Bidy drew back behind the open door and waited. She heard Marna's voice, but she could not distinguish what she said. She heard Harnigan's voice replying, respectful and stolid as usual, and she thought she saw a flicker of surprise cross the passivity of his face, but she could not distinguish his words either, for the wind was howling all round them, and the rain was pattering heavily down on to the cobble stones.

Then after a moment Marna turned and went back to the house, passing quite close to where Bidy stood, and Harnigan looked after her with a strange expression on his wooden face; pity, Bidy thought it was, only she could not remember ever hearing Harnigan say he was sorry for anyone.

Then he shrugged his shirted shoulders, and picked up the end of the hosepipe again.

The Little Flapper waited a moment, then she went determinedly forward.

"Harnigan!"

The man started violently and swung round, then he gave an exclamation of dismay.

"You'll be catching your death of cold, Miss. Whatever was you out here for?"

He snatched up a rug lying close by and came towards her, but Bidy waved him away.

"I'm all right. I can change, and there's no time to lose. Harnigan, did Mrs. Paget order the car for to-night?"

"She did *not*, Miss."

The Little Flapper gave a great sigh of relief.

"Oh well then, for to-morrow, perhaps?" she hazarded.

Harnigan had recovered his self-possession.

"The mistress uses the car on most days, as you know, Miss," he answered firmly.

Biddy frowned.

"I know, but what time did she order it for?"

And then as the man did not reply she went closer to him and stamped her foot. "Have you lost your tongue that you don't answer?" she demanded. "Can't you see that I shouldn't ask you if it wasn't absolutely necessary for me to know? What time did she order the car? Harnigan, why don't you answer?"

Harnigan spoke then, with all the dignity at his command.

"'Twould be degradading, Miss, to talk about things that don't concern me."

"But it does concern you, it does!" the Little Flapper insisted almost in tears. "It concerns us all, Harnigan. I thought you were fond of her——"

Harnigan's wooden face flushed dully, and he ran an agitated hand across the back of his head.

"I beg pardon, Miss, I'm sure, but my duty——"

The Little Flapper went very close to him. She was white, and the tears were vying with the rain-drops on her cheeks.

"If you won't tell me I shall fetch Mr. Paget and he'll *make* you," she said with a determination that amazed herself, and then with a burst of passionate earnestness: "Oh, Harnigan, if you just adored someone, and you knew they were going to ruin their lives—she was, I mean—ruin her life!—wouldn't you do everything you could to stop them—her, I mean?" Biddy was all muddled up

and incoherent, but instinct told her that Harnigan guessed something of the tragedy in Marna's life, and that she had been right when she fancied she saw pity in his wooden face.

There was a moment of profound silence, then Harnigan said, looking away from Biddy's tearful eyes.

"The small car is ordered for half-past eight for the master, Miss, and the big car for nine o'clock for the mistress. The master is driving himself somewhere."

"Both cars!"

Harnigan nodded. He could not trust himself to speak. He felt as if with this betrayal of his mistress's orders he had sunk to the lowest depths of degradation. The Little Flapper said again:

"Both cars! Where can they be going? Harnigan, do you know where they are going?"

"The master told me to have his golf clubs in the small car, Miss."

"Oh!" Biddy gasped. She knew that George Paget had not played golf for months. It was a favourite joke of his that he was getting too old and fat to play.

"And—and the big car?" she faltered.

Harnigan kept his honest eyes averted.

"To go to Southampton, Miss," he jerked out.

Biddy choked down the feeling of suffocation in her throat.

"Any—anything else?" she gasped.

"I mentioned luggage, Miss, but—but the mistress said she was only taking a suit-case, Miss."

"Yes, Harnigan."

"That's all, Miss, except that—that I was not to mention it to—to anyone—not till afterwards, Miss Biddy."

"Oh, *Harnigan!*"

There was a heartbroken note in the Little Flapper's voice, and Harnigan turned his head, and for a moment they looked at one another in mutual shame and grief. They both loved Marna, and they each felt that they had betrayed her.

It was Biddy who recovered first.

"You can't go, Harnigan," she whispered. "You *know* you can't!"

Harnigan flushed in deep distress.

"Not if you say so, Miss," he ejaculated.

"I do say so. We must have a puncture—a very bad one."

The ghost of a smile crossed his face.

"There are a couple of new spares, Miss. We can't puncture them both. 'Twouldn't be natural."

Biddy was shivering with cold and excitement, and her eyes were feverish.

"Then what *can* we do?" she demanded fiercely. "You must think of something. You know how to mend cars, Harnigan, so can't you find out how to break them?"

Harnigan's eyes were filled with mortification.

"I've been with Mr. Paget all these years, Miss, and nothing's ever happened to the cars just when they was wanted. My record will be ruined for ever, Miss."

Biddy found an eloquent reply.

"What does that matter if nobody's life is ruined?"



Harnigan stared down at the hosepipe which he was still clutching and it seemed a long time to the Little Flapper before he spoke.

"Very well, Miss, no doubt you know best, Miss, but 'twill be degradading all the same," he added under his breath.

The Little Flapper grabbed his hard hand and squeezed it.

"You're an angel, Harnigan," she whispered, and fled back to the house before he had time to change his mind.

She was drenched to the skin but she managed to reach her room unseen, and take off her wet clothes, then she slipped on a dressing-gown and went in search of Marna.

She was too excited to think coherently; she only felt as if someone had told her that an earthquake was at hand and that she alone could prevent it. Well, she had done what she could, and the rest lay in the hands of Fate.

If she could delay Marna's departure just for a little while, just for a few hours, Hugh Hubbard would have gone, and the danger would be over.

"How can I let her go? How *can* I?" Biddy asked herself wildly as she stole across the wide landing to Marna's room. "It means ruining everyone's life. Marna's, and Hugh's, and George's as well! Oh, poor darlings, all of them."

And then the tears came, and would not be controlled, and she ran back to her room and crept into bed and lay crying in the darkness. For she knew quite well that Marna had reached the end of her tether and could bear no more. Her very

passivity at dinner that night had been more eloquent than any passionate outburst.

"If they could only *all* be happy!" Biddy thought wildly, as she pressed her burning face into the cool pillow. "Why aren't things better arranged in life? It will break Marna's heart—and if she goes it will break George's, and they are both such darlings."

She had almost sobbed herself to sleep when Marna came to the door.

"Biddy! Are you in bed, Biddy?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes, darling."

Marna came into the room, but to the Little Flapper's infinite relief she did not turn on the light, but groped her way to the bed through the darkness.

"Aren't you well, Biddy? It's so early for you to go to bed."

"I'm rather tired." The Little Flapper found Marna's hand and kissed it. "Sit down and talk to me," she whispered.

"Why didn't you say good night to me, Biddy?"

"Because I knew you'd come and find me, anyway."

There was a little silence, then Marna asked:

"Would you miss me very much if I wasn't here?"

The Little Flapper felt as if someone had squeezed her heart. She knelt up in bed and flung both arms round Marna's neck.

"You *know* I should!" she answered passionately.

"You know you're everything in the world to me. I should just die if you were not here."

Marna laughed rather sadly.

"We don't die so easily, Biddy."

"But you're not going away, so why talk about it," the Little Flapper urged. She felt that this moment had been given to her so that she might add yet another stone to her poor little wall of defence. "What would Uncle George do without you? He would break his heart. What would any of us do without you? You're one of those people other people always look up to, and cling to," Biddy said with breathless eloquence. "Perhaps it's selfish of us. Perhaps we don't consider your happiness as much as we ought to, but——"

Marna unclasped the girl's arms from about her neck; she felt as if they were choking her.

"I've never known what happiness, *real* happiness really is," she said harshly. "All my life I've never known. It may be my own fault, I dare say it is, but all the same it's not fair!"

There was a tragic silence.

The Little Flapper sat crouched back on her heels, her eyes straining to see Marna's face through the darkness. There had been something so terrific in those harshly spoken words, something so soul-revealing and bitter, that Biddy was shaken to the depths of her youthful soul.

She had known for a long time that Marna was unhappy, but until now she had not realized the depths of her unsatisfied longing. They had called her the Luckiest Lady, she and the Big Flapper! Blind little fools they had been! As if money and diamonds and all the things money can buy could make anyone really happy.

She found her voice in a broken whisper.

"You've got me, Marna, and Uncle George, and we'd both die to make you happy."

"Oh, I know, I know. I'm ungrateful and wicked, but—I *have* tried, I have tried! I suppose I must be horribly weak, because in the end unless you're very strong, you find that you can't beat life, life beats you instead, and that's what has happened to me."

"What do you mean?" the Little Flapper whispered, but she knew only too well.

There was a long silence broken only by the wind and the rain outside, then Marna laughed as if in self-scorn.

"I've been talking nonsense, why didn't you stop me? It's too bad keeping you awake. Besides, I've got to get up early to-morrow."

Biddy moistened her dry lips.

"Early? Why, what for?"

"George is going to play golf." Marna smoothed Biddy's hair. "I've been telling him he's getting too fat, so I've made him promise to go down to Moore Park and have a day with Mr. Saunders. You don't know Mr. Saunders, do you, Biddy? He lunched with us and Hugh the other day. I liked him. He used to live in Shanghai years ago. He's a nice man. His sister is going out on the *Karmala* with Hugh." It all sounded so stiff and unreal, but she struggled on. "So George is going to Moore Park, and that means he must get up very early. He will leave here at half-past eight."

"Oh!" Biddy clenched her hands to steady herself. "Why don't you go with him?" she asked.

"I?" Marna laughed. "I'm no golfer, you know that. Besides, men are happier alone sometimes."

"Then let you and I go somewhere together," Biddy rushed in impulsively. "We haven't been out alone for ages. Do let us go somewhere for the day together, darling."

"Not to-morrow. Some other time. I'm engaged to-morrow." Marna rose to her feet with a nervous little laugh. "Some other time," she said again. "And now you must go to sleep."

"I'm not a bit tired."

Marna stifled a yawn.

"Aren't you? I am, dreadfully tired. I wish I could sleep on late to-morrow."

"Well, why don't you? I'll get up and see Uncle George off."

The Little Flapper's voice was eager, but Marna only laughed.

"No, I promised. Besides, it's not good for me to be lazy. I'm much better when I keep on doing things all the time. Good night, Biddy dear."

"Good night, darling."

They kissed each other quietly.

"She'll guess that I know something if I'm not very careful," the Little Flapper told herself in anguish, but she had to forcibly restrain herself from springing up and following the woman she adored. It would be such a relief to tell her the truth, to say: "I know all about it. I know what you're going to do, but don't do it, darling. I beg of you don't do it."

But Biddy was afraid. There was something

different about Marna to-night, something that seemed to hold one at arm's length.

"At any rate I can get up early in the morning," Biddy told herself with faint comfort. "I can be up long before she is." She lay awake for hours, listening to little sounds about the house, longing for daylight to come, but in the end, just when the first pale streak was showing round the edge of the curtains, Biddy fell into exhausted sleep, from which she was only roused by an insistent tapping at her door, and her name being called by one of the maids.

"Miss Biddy! Miss Biddy!"

"Come in," Biddy murmured drowsily, but before the girl could obey, the Little Flapper was out of bed and had opened the door herself.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked in a scared voice. She was half asleep still, and for a moment she had forgotten the events of the night before.

The maid looked uncomfortable.

"It's nothing, Miss, only it's late, and both you and the mistress being still asleep, and Harnigan in trouble about the car, not knowing what to do——"

"Harnigan!"

The name was like a key opening a locked door in Biddy's mind. In a flash she was fully awake. She caught up her dressing-gown.

"What is the time, anyway?" she asked in a quiet little voice. "And what's the matter with the car, and who wants it so early?"

"It's half-past nine, Miss Biddy and——"

"Half-past *nine*!"

"Yes, Miss, and the car was ordered for nine

o'clock punctually, so Harnigan says, but there's something wrong with it, and——"

"There's the small car," the Little Flapper said.

"The master's taken the small car, Miss. He's been gone an hour or more to golf, and the mistress isn't awake yet—she left orders that she wasn't to be disturbed, and Harnigan's that worried——"

"I'll go and see," Biddy said.

Her heart was pounding as she went to Marna's room and gently knocked, but there was no reply. The maid had followed her, vaguely disturbed, and the two girls looked at one another silently for a moment before Biddy asked:

"Who told you not to disturb her?"

"The mistress herself, last night, Miss."

"But Uncle George——"

"Mr. Paget slept in his dressing-room, Miss Biddy."

"Oh!" Biddy hesitated yet another moment, then she turned the handle of Marna's room and entered.

The room was in darkness, but although she could not see that the bed was empty, the Little Flapper knew it instinctively. There was a feeling of desertion in the room—almost as if someone had just died there, so Biddy thought with a shaking terror, and for a moment she felt as if she must scream or cry out before, with a desperate effort, she pulled herself together, and tiptoed back to the door.

"It's all right—she's still asleep," she whispered with cold lips. "Tell Harnigan he need not wait. I'll explain. She won't want the car yet, I know."

"Very good, Miss."

The girl went away looking relieved, and Biddy shut the door of Marna's room and stood leaning against it with a little sick feeling.

She had failed after all—Marna had gone!

"Why did I go to sleep? Why did I?" the Little Flapper asked herself frantically. "And oh, what shall we do?"

She moved slowly across the room and drew back the curtains. The sun was shining brightly, and when with shaking hands Biddy opened the window, the morning air on her face felt fresh and cool, and suddenly Biddy thought of the sea—and of Hugh Hubbard.

What happiness for Marna if she had gone with him! How could one blame her?

Then she thought of George Paget; dear, unselfish George, and a crashing sense of tragedy fell upon her heart. It would kill him when he knew—he trusted Marna so utterly, loved her so profoundly.

The Little Flapper looked round the room with piteous eyes. It seemed impossible that Marna would never come back again—the room was so much a part of her—the slippers she had worn at dinner last night lay carelessly on the hearthrug—her brushes were still on the dressing-table, her powder box and scent bottles—the Little Flapper gave a rush towards them, as propped up against one she saw a letter.

It was addressed simply "George," but to Biddy it was a death-warrant, telling her that her worst fears were realized, and that this was indeed the end—Marna had gone.



IT is said that only a strong man can run away from a woman who loves him and whom he loves, but Hugh Hubbard had never realized his weakness until he knew that by his own action he had made it impossible to see Marna again.

A dozen times on his way to Southampton he felt that he must go back—that it was impossible to continue the journey; a dozen times after he reached the hotel where he was to stay the night he very nearly decided to cancel his passage and return to London. He paced his room all night long, suffering more now he was away from Marna than he had ever suffered when he was with her.

He had thought to save them both pain by avoiding a further good-bye, and he knew that he had but made matters worse; he knew that even as he was suffering so she must be suffering also, and the thought was unendurable.

What was she thinking of him? What was she doing with the long, terrible night which one moment seemed as if it would never pass, and the next as if it was rushing away on merciless wings, speeding them both nearer to an hour when there would no longer be a hope of meeting one another—only miles of sea and separation.

"I can't leave her—I must go back," so Hubbard told himself again and again, but he knew its hopelessness. How could he deliberately

smash up his friend's life? The thing was an impossibility.

In vain he argued with his conscience that it had been done thousands of times before and would be done again; in vain he argued that everyone had a right to happiness; why was love given to men and women if they might not take it?

"I can't leave her. I will go back in the morning." So he told himself as he paced the room during the long, silent hours, but in the morning he knew he could not, he knew that he must go on—on!—and take the only honourable course left to him. And yet honour seemed such a small thing when he remembered the way Marna had looked at him that last time—the way she had turned from him after Saunders had told her that his sister was sailing on the same boat.

That had been their good-bye; he would always remember her with that tragedy of pain in her eyes which she tried so hard to disguise. As if Saunders' sister was anything to him! As if any other woman in the world was anything to him or ever would be.

"I must go back," he told himself passionately for the thousandth time. "I can't leave her. I must go back."

But in the morning he was one of the first passengers to board the *Karmala*, although down to the last moment he was pretending to himself that it was not too late—that at the eleventh hour he could still change his mind—still go ashore again—that he meant to go ashore again—that he could not leave Marna behind—how could he leave her behind?

And to the end he stood by the gangway, his heart torn, his brain on fire and confused. Perhaps she would come to the boat to see him before he went? He tried to believe that she would—hoped passionately that she would—and the next moment he was telling himself the futility of such a hope. How could she come to him when he had left her without a word of farewell?

People were going ashore. Close beside him a woman was sobbing and clinging to a man's arm. Hubbard glanced at her and quickly away again. He could not go on—he must go back—what did anything matter but the woman one loved.

"I will go back," he told himself feverishly, and he went down to his cabin and began to throw back into his suit-case the few things he had already unpacked.

Nothing mattered but Marna—nothing mattered but that she——

The ship was moving.

Hubbard stood very still, listening to the sounds of departure, the running feet on deck and the blast of the ship's syren.

It was too late.

For a moment longer he stood, then he turned and rushed up the companion.

Not yet too late, not yet——

But there was a wide gap of water between the ship and the quayside, and already it was hardly possible to distinguish figures left behind.

White handkerchiefs waved—voices called across, trying in vain to bridge the ever-increasing space.

On the quay a group of people were gathered

round someone—a fainting woman—probably the one who had cried so and clung to the man's arm, Hubbard thought.

He leaned on the ship's rail and strained his eyes back to the shore.

It was too late to go back now. They had both got to go on—to go on their separate ways, he and Marna—and God alone knew if they would ever meet again.

He stood on deck till the coastline had faded out of sight, then he turned away with a little shiver.

It was all over—there was nothing left but an empty future.

A man beside him spoke abruptly with blunt emotion.

“My last glimpse of England for many a long day.”

“Mine too,” Hubbard answered.

They stood silently looking towards the empty skyline, then the other man said again:

“Rotten business, eh?”

“Yes—if you leave anyone behind,” Hubbard answered.

He felt his companion's eyes upon him.

“I'm not lucky enough,” the other man said with a gruff laugh. “But I saw rather a pathetic incident just before we sailed. By the way, I nearly lost the boat—you saw, I suppose? I motored in from Lyndhurst this morning—been staying there—and something went wrong with the car. You saw the rush I had to get on board, I suppose?”

“No. I was down below.”

"Well I only just did it by the skin of my teeth. They were hauling the gangway up when I made a dash for it. There was a woman who wanted to do the same thing—not a passenger, but she kept saying she must see someone on the ship. She hadn't got a ticket or a permit, or whatever you have to have, and anyway she was too late. I felt sorry for her—attractive woman—looked frightfully ill, too. Don't know where she came from. Should like to have helped her find the man, whoever he was, but I was in a dashed hurry myself and there was a crowd of officials keeping her back. Poor little devil! Believe she fainted when she saw them haul the gangway up. Rotten business, eh, going off to the other side of the world?"

"Yes."

"Been away before?"

"All my life more or less."

"You're used to it, then?"

"I suppose I should be."

The two men looked at one another with friendly eyes.

"Might as well exchange names," the elder man said gruffly. "Got to be neighbours for six or seven weeks, I suppose. My name's Blackwell—James Blackwell."

"Mine's Hubbard—Hugh Hubbard—— What's the matter?"

"Nothing—only—that little woman I was speaking about just now. I heard her tell the official chap who stopped her coming aboard that she wanted to see someone of your name—Hubbard, she said—I heard her say it several times. Of course it may be some

other Hubbard—not a very uncommon name, eh? I only just mentioned it. Sorry if I——”

Hubbard turned on his heel and walked away.

So she had come to say good-bye to him after all, and he had not seen her!

He went down to his cabin and locked the door, then he sat down on the edge of his bed and hid his face in his hands.

She had come to say good-bye, and he had not seen her. Over and over again he kept telling himself that.

He suddenly visualized the little group of people round a fainting woman on the quayside. Had that been Marna? He remembered how she had fainted the first night he came home—it tore at his heart-strings to remember Mrs. Blair’s blunt indignation:

“Where are George Paget’s eyes that he can’t see how ill she looks?”

Was that true? Was she ill, really ill?

She had come to say good-bye to him and he had not seen her, and with every moment now the distance between them was widening—already it was impassable—a gulf of eternity between his life and that of the woman he loved.

If only he could have said good-bye to her—if they had just had one last moment together.

He had been a blind fool to leave her as he had done; a blind, selfish fool.

And now it was too late.

Life was a cruel jest, a cynical riddle to which no man ever finds the answer. One had just to go on hoping, looking forward to the realization of

happiness—looking forward in vain, until the end of the road was reached and the great farce played out.

*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XIV*

THE Little Flapper never knew how she got through that interminable day.

She spent most of it in Marna's bedroom with the door locked. When the maids came to ask if they could do anything Biddy pretended that Marna was in bed with a headache.

She had had a brief interview with Harnigan in which neither of them had mentioned Marna's name.

"I'm sorry the car went wrong," the Little Flapper said, "but, as it happens, Mrs. Paget won't be wanting it. She's in her room with a bad headache."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Miss."

"She'll be all right presently," Biddy said firmly, but she looked away from him. "You'll see that the car is all right again by the time Mr. Paget comes home to-night, Harnigan?"

"The car is all right again now, Miss."

Biddy drew a sigh of relief and went back to Marna's room. The day was a nightmare; she felt as if she were acting a part, a terrible, tragic part and that if she forgot one word of it or missed one queue, disaster would befall them all.

She was at her wits' end to know what to do for the best. She had wild thoughts of telephoning to George, but realized the futility. She had a longing impulse to rush off to Mrs. Blair—her kind sanity would be such a help and comfort, but Biddy knew that by one false move she might ruin the last hope left to her. For there was still in her heart a faint hope that Marna might return.

"She must! She must!" she told herself passionately as she sat on the side of Marna's bed in the darkened room, her hands clasped together, every nerve in her body strained to snapping point.

When the maids came to the door to ask if anything was wanted, she spoke to them in whispers. She took in tea-trays and beef-teas and jellies because they brought them, and tried in vain to eat them herself. And all the time she was telling herself in despair:

"It's no use. I might as well give in. Marna will never come back. We've got to face it, poor Uncle George and me."

There was a telephone beside Marna's bed, and at midday Biddy rang up the steamship office to ask if the *Karmala* had sailed.

"If this was a story," she told herself wretchedly as she waited for a reply, "something would have happened to prevent it—she would have broken a propeller or something."

But it was not a story; it was real life, and the *Karmala* had sailed to scheduled time.

"And Marna has gone, too," Biddy told herself in despair. "I know she has! Oh, what shall we do, and how could she leave us all?"



But the next moment she was defending Marna against herself.

"Who could blame her? If she loves him and he loves her why shouldn't they be together?"

Then she sobbed and sobbed, her face buried in Marna's pillows to stifle the sound.

But Marna came back. Nobody knew how she slipped unobserved into the house, or by what means she came, but early in the evening when it was almost dark and Biddy was frantically wondering how she was to meet George Paget and what she could tell him, someone tried the handle of the locked door, and when the Little Flapper flew to open it, not daring to hope, and yet almost wild with hope, Marna stood on the landing outside. She did not look any different—only very pale and tired—and when Biddy stood aside, unable to speak, she passed her and entered the room, taking off her hat as she came, just as if nothing unusual had happened—just as if she had only been out shopping or to tea with a friend.

"All in the dark!" she said.

She switched on the light, and her eyes fell on the pathetic collection of trays on a table at the foot of the bed. Untouched cups of tea—untouched plates of jelly. She stood for a moment staring at them, then she turned slowly round and looked at the Little Flapper.

There was no need for words—they were just two women who understood one another perfectly; understood and sympathized.

Then Marna said apathetically:

"I should not have come back, only they

wouldn't let me on the boat. You had to have a pass or something."

She waited a moment, but Biddy could not find her voice, and Marna gave a little imperceptible shrug and walked over to the dressing-table.

"I should like a hot bath," she said. "And is George in?"

"Not yet, darling." Biddy almost choked over the words.

Marna looked at herself in the mirror.

"I'm glad," she said expressionlessly. "I'm glad. He need never know now, I suppose, need he?"

"No, darling. Nobody need know. I let them think you were ill in bed with a bad headache."

Marna raised her brows.

"Harnigan knows," she said.

"Oh!"

"I heard you talking to him in the garage last night," Marna said very quietly. "That's why I slipped out earlier than I meant to and went by train." She sat down on the arm of a chair, her eyes fixed on the carpet, and for a moment there was a profound silence before she said again: "Nothing ever goes right for me—at least, only things that can be bought and paid for. I'm always lucky in that way, but not in anything else." She raised her eyes suddenly to the Little Flapper's sad face. "I suppose you despise me, Biddy."

"No. How can I? You know I don't. I'm only so—sorry!" the Little Flapper whispered.

Marna laughed mirthlessly.

"You don't need to be sorry. I shall just go on.

I did before and I can again." She rose slowly to her feet once more. "Tell Annie I should like a hot bath, and ask her to put out my blue frock. It must be nearly dinner time."

"It's ten minutes to seven."

"I shall have to hurry."

Biddy went away. She could not trust herself to speak. She was only conscious of a great thankfulness that Marna had come back. And yet there was a vague fear in her heart also. Marna was different—since last night she was different. She made the Little Flapper think of a window which she had grown accustomed to see always brightly and warmly illuminated to which someone had come and roughly extinguished the light.

But she dared not think too much. She ordered Marna's bath, then went to her own room and changed her frock. She felt shaken and feverish.

"I caught cold last night, that's what it is," she thought as she brushed her hair. "Getting wet through—I caught cold."

She heard George Paget's step on the stairs and then his hearty voice calling to his wife, and she closed her eyes in thankfulness.

"It's all right still, thank God," the Little Flapper whispered, and then she thought of Hugh Hubbard, and of a big ship ploughing its way through a great ocean, and a sob caught her throat. What was he thinking—feeling—and all alone with nobody to talk to or help him bear it?

"It's quite true what Marna says," the Little Flapper told herself. "It's quite true that we're not all meant to be happy. I wonder why it is?"

She put another little dab of powder on her face and went down to dinner.

It was just like any other ordinary dinner.

George Paget talked of his golf like a delighted schoolboy. Apparently he had played the game of his life, a feat which had greatly astounded him. Biddy listened while he related how he had done the thirteenth in one under bogey whatever that meant; how he and Saunders had been all square on the sixteenth, etc., etc., and then how he had beat him at the finish.

"I've come to the conclusion I'm not so old or so fat, after all, don't cher know!" he said complacently, looking across at his wife. "In fact, I'm going to play Saunders again on Monday."

"I should, dear," Marna said. "And of course you're not old or fat. You're just in the prime of life."

She felt as if she were playing a game; a game in which one had to go on, either till one won or was hopelessly beaten. When would the end come and what would it be? Either she would see Hugh Hubbard again, or else there would be nothing any more—just nothing.

"Tired to-night?" George Paget asked after dinner, and with an effort she roused herself and declared that she had not felt so fresh and wideawake for years.

That pleased him.

"Good! I've got two stalls for a show," he said. "Thought you might feel a bit dull with Hugh just gone."

Marna laughed.

"Silly! Why ever should I?"

Paget looked a bit abashed.

"Oh, just thought perhaps you might, don't cher know," he said. "Hate people goin' away myself. Good sort, Hugh—one of the best."

"Yes."

"I sent the wire, you know. Just good luck, *bon voyage* and all that sort of thing."

"Yes. He will be pleased."

Paget looked at his watch.

"Well, we ought to be starting," he said.

"I'll get my cloak. What show is it, George?"

"Musical comedy." He grinned at her boyishly.

"Can't stand the other sort of tripe."

"That will be fun."

*Fun!* Marna laughed to herself as she went upstairs. Would ever anything be fun again? She felt as if her life was at an end.

The Little Flapper came into her room for a moment.

"I'm going to bed. I'm tired," she said. "I think I've got a bit of a cold."

"Have you? Get Annie to bring you something hot."

Marna kissed her absently and went downstairs again.

Harnigan was there with the big car.

"I'm glad it's not the little car," Marna said unthinkingly as George got in beside her.

"Are you? Why?"

"Because——" She checked herself in time. She had been going to say, "Because last time I was in the little car Hugh drove." That was all over.

She and Hugh would never drive together again. Every moment now carried him farther from her.

The musical comedy was noisy and very little more than a show of legs and scenery, but George loved it. He applauded everything and admired all the chorus girls.

"Rattling fine lot!" he said. He passed Marna his glasses. "Look at that second girl from the left. Some figure—eh?"

He was like a boy in his harmless enjoyment; he would have been amazed if he could have known how heart-sick the woman beside him was feeling.

"Toppin' show! Best show I've seen for years," he declared as they left the theatre. He held his wife's hand all the way home.

"Haven't been out alone for ages," he said happily. "Quite like old times, eh?"

"Yes."

"Still happy to be with me, Marna?"

"Of course."

Such an effort to answer naturally. Marna pressed her feet hard to the floor of the car. She did not want to be with anyone; she just wanted to be alone, to hide herself somewhere in the dark, or to go to sleep and never wake up again.

But she knew she must go on acting, acting!

When they reached home she went at once to her room, and when Paget followed her she gently checked him.

"I'm so tired. Do you mind sleeping in the dressing-room?" Then as she saw the blank look on his handsome face she said again, with a sob of

utter weariness: "Don't mind, dear, but I am so deathly tired."

"Course not! You've been gaddin' about too much. Must take it gently for a time." He bent and kissed her. "Sleep well."

"I shall sleep like the dead."

But once in her room Marna made no effort to undress or go to bed. She just sat down by the window in the darkness, and jerked back the curtains to look out at the night.

It was moonlight. Regent's Park looked like fairy-land with its grassy carpet and tree tops touched with silver.

The lake lay like a bath of silver, too, very still, and the silence was unbroken save now and then by the mournful hoot of an owl. It would be moonlight at sea too, she knew—glorious moonlight. She shut her eyes and visualized a big ship ploughing its lonely way through vast waters.

What was Hugh doing? Awake perhaps and thinking of her as she was thinking of him, or perhaps he was pacing the deck with Saunders' sister.

That thought hurt like an actual physical pain, and she shut her eyes and bit her lip till the blood came.

She felt as if she were caught in a trap from which she could never hope to escape. A trap which would torture her and tear her nerves all the rest of her life, while outside the world went on happily for other luckier people.

Hours afterwards she fell asleep, still sitting there, her head resting on her arms on the window-sill, and there early in the morning George Paget found her.

He had wakened up suddenly, and, with a queer apprehension, flung on his dressing-gown and went into his wife's room.

It was getting light, but the moon was still bright in the sky, and by its paling rays he saw Marna crouched by the window, still in the frock she had worn last night.

For a moment he stood looking at her, petrified with fear. There was something so lonely and unhappy about her even in sleep that his kind heart throbbed with sudden pain.

He had always known his own limitations, always known that he could not get as near to the woman he adored as he wished, but never until now had it struck him how far away from him she really was.

She was always sweet and kind, always willing to do everything he wished, and yet even when he held her in his arms, unimaginative man as he was, he had the strange feeling that she did not really belong to him.

After all, he only knew as much of her as she chose he should know; her real thoughts and emotions were a sealed book to him.

He went quietly forward, closing the door behind him, and stood looking down at her.

She was very pale—or was it the moonlight?—and she looked very young—almost like the girl he had married—but she did not look happy. There was a little drawn line about her mouth as if she were in pain, or perhaps as if she wanted to cry, and when at last he gently touched her to rouse her, she started up with a stifled moan.

“Marna, my dear, are you ill?”



"Ill?" She was on her feet, swaying with sleep, staring at him with unrecognizing eyes, then she laughed and made a gallant effort to recover herself. "I must have fallen asleep. What time is it? I am so tired. What time is it? I'll undress at once and go to bed."

He looked at her ruefully.

"It's time to get up almost. Nearly seven."

"Seven!" She coloured incredulously beneath his gaze. "And I've slept there all night!"

"Yes, and in the moonlight. Bad for you, Marna, don't cher know."

She laughed again without much mirth.

"Yes; I shall be funny in the head, George." She put up her hands to her hair. "It only shows how tired I really was. I told you I was tired."

He regarded her anxiously.

"I don't like it. Don't like it at all. You ought to see a doctor."

"What nonsense!" She was wide awake now, wide awake to the pain of another endless day.

"I shall be quite all right when I've had a bath and changed. I wonder what made me do such a thing. I don't remember a word about it." She put up her hand and touched his face. "Run away and don't look so scared. I'm quite all right."

"I don't like it, Marna," Paget said again. "You ought to see a doctor."

But he went reluctantly away and Marna began to undress. Her head ached miserably, and the thought of the day before her was like a strangling hand at her throat. Nothing to look forward to any more—just emptiness!

With the early tea came a message from the Little Flapper.

"Miss Biddy's head aches, and she's got a sore throat. She thinks she's got a chill, Madam."

"I'll go to her."

Marna ran across the landing to Biddy's room.

The girl was lying in bed, her face flushed and her eyes bright, but she smiled when she saw Marna.

"So sorry, darling"—her voice was hoarse and strange—"I feel just rotten! Do you mind if I don't get up?"

"Biddy!" Marna bent over her. "You caught cold the night before last—going out into the rain. It's all my fault."

"Nonsense! I often get cold. But if I can just stay in bed for a day——"

But the Little Flapper was in bed for many days with a sharp attack of pneumonia.

Looking back on it afterwards Marna thanked God for that illness.

"It saved me—it just saved me from despair," she told herself when, after a hard fight, the Little Flapper was pronounced to be out of danger.

There had been no time for Marna to think of herself, no time for anyone to think of anything except how they could help to keep death at bay.

"If she dies it will be my fault," Marna told herself bitterly a hundred times. "If she dies my selfishness will have killed her." She never left the girl for a moment.

"I shall have two patients on my hands instead of one if you won't rest," the doctor said, but Marna would not listen.

She did everything for Biddy herself; she never left her till the crisis was past.

"She owes her life to you," everyone told her.

"She might have owed her death to me," was the unspoken reply on Marna's lips.

Mrs. Blair came and went, a faithful friend. She talked common sense and preached the doctrine of hope when everyone else believed that all hope was gone.

"Die! Pooh! of course she won't die," she declared. "It will be an everlasting disgrace to all of you if she does."

And when the Little Flapper pulled round the corner and began to smile and take an interest in life again, Mrs. Blair smiled too, and permitted herself the satisfaction of saying, "I told you so." She spent hours by the Little Flapper's bedside then, while Marna at last got the rest she so badly needed.

"She saved your life," she told Biddy bluntly, "and I hope you'll never forget it."

"She's done everything for me always," Biddy answered, "and I'd die for her."

Mrs. Blair said: "Humph! It's often easier to die for people than to live for them."

She put a strong, capable arm beneath the Little Flapper's head and fluffed up her pillows.

"Hasn't Dolly been to see me?" Biddy asked.

Mrs. Blair made a little grimace.

"I haven't seen Dolly for weeks," she said. "Not since you've been ill, anyway, but I've heard all sorts of things about her, and about the way she's going the pace. John's done with her, anyway. He told

me that she was the worse for drink at the Elfin Club the other night. I don't know what the world's coming to! In my young days we were never allowed a *taste* of wine, and now the girls drink as much and more than many of the men. I hope John means what he says. Dolly's too much of the modern product for me to want her as a daughter-in-law."

"I thought John was so fond of her," Biddy said faintly.

"So he was, but he's sensible, and the way she has been behaving lately has disgusted him. I tell him there are just as good fish in the sea as any that are caught."

"Poor Dolly," Biddy whispered, for she had been fond of the Big Flapper, in spite of their frequent disagreements.

"Thank heaven Marna's brought *you* up to be a self-respecting girl," Mrs. Blair went on energetically. "She'll have no need to be ashamed of you; at least, I hope not," she added, fixing the girl with her stern, kindly eyes.

"I'd die for her," Biddy said again, and then unthinkingly she added: "I'd give anything to make her happy."

"Happy!" Mrs. Blair pursed up her lips and settled the voluminous folds of her old-fashioned frock. "It's a tall order to try and make anyone happy," she said. "Folks have to make their own happiness nowadays, and very few of them have the capacity."

"How long have I been ill?" Biddy asked presently.

"Nearly a month. It's almost the end of May now. You'll have all the summer for convalescence—that's something in your favour."

A month! The Little Flapper made a slow calculation. Hugh Hubbard was not yet at the end of his journey, and yet to her youth a month was almost as long as a lifetime. It seemed impossible that there could be such great distances to divide people.

"I should like Dolly to come and see me," she said presently. After all, she and Dolly had had a great deal in common, and the Little Flapper felt that during her illness she had lost touch with life, and that the Big Flapper could put her into contact with it once again.

But no visitors were allowed for another week, and then one afternoon Marna told her that Dolly was coming to tea.

"Not to stay long," she said, with pretended severity. "And there's not to be too much chattering." She drew back the curtains which had been closed for Biddy's midday sleep. "It's a heavenly day," she said. "And the lilacs are all out in the park, Biddy."

"Are they, darling?" Biddy answered absently. Her eyes were on Marna's face, such a pale, tired face it looked, and surely, surely she had grown much thinner.

A pang of anxiety touched the girl's heart; she held out her hand.

"Come here, Marna."

"Well, what is it?" Marna sat down on the side of the bed.

"I wish there was something I could do for you, just to show how much I love you," Biddy said.

Marna did not answer at once; she looked away, across the room to the window through which the spring sunshine was pouring.

"Perhaps some day there will be," she said.

"Oh, I hope so! It's always you who gives to me; there never seems to be anything I can give to you or do for you," the Little Flapper said wistfully.

Marna smiled and patted her hand.

"Perhaps some day there will be," she said again.

"And—I think this must be Dolly Benson."

It was Dolly! A very smart Dolly, with more than a touch of carmine on her lips and a new hardness in her eyes which the Little Flapper was quick to notice.

"And you must only stay half an hour," Marna warned her as she left the two girls together.

Dolly waited till the door was shut, then she walked over to the dressing-table and produced a powder-puff, with which she carefully dabbed her face.

"So you nearly snuffed it!" she said inelegantly.

"Yes." The Little Flapper watched her with quiet eyes. "I should have died if it hadn't been for Marna," she said.

"When pain and anguish wring the brow, a ministering angel thou," the Big Flapper said flippantly. "Well, if there's one thing I detest, it is nursing. I hope when I die I shall be knocked down by a good London omnibus and finished straight off. No picturesque lying in bed and drinking filthy medicine for me." She turned round and

came nearer to the bed. "You look worth just about two-three!" she declared.

"I look better than I did a week ago," Biddy said defensively. She felt almost inclined to cry, "And you'd look as rotten as I do if you'd been as ill as I have."

"I know. I'm not blaming you, and with all the Pagets' money you'll soon be yourself. Lucky dog! Wish I were you. I've never got a bean to bless myself with. The gov'nor's as mean as the devil—he's got one-way pockets."

The Little Flapper laughed softly.

"You always want such a lot of money," she protested.

"You can't do a thing without it nowadays," Dolly protested. "I've joined the Elfin Club. Everyone who is anyone belongs to the Elfin now."

"I've never heard of it."

"No, it's quite new. Renny Martin started it, and he must be making pots out of it."

"Oh! What do they do there?"

"Dance and play cards—and drink," Dolly said airily. "I've learnt to play poker. It's a thrilling game, only I'm never very lucky at it. Have you ever played?"

"No, but Uncle George does."

"Well, he's rich enough to be able to win. It's the kind of game where the man with the most money always wins."

"What a funny sort of game."

"It's a ripping game. Shall I pour out the tea?"

"Yes, please."

Dolly scanned the tea-tray.

"No cocktails or brandy, I suppose?" she submitted with a grimace.

The Little Flapper opened her eyes wide.

"Good heavens! of course not."

"Why 'of course not'? Everyone does it now. Tea's rotten without cocktails."

"Rotten with it I should think," Biddy said disgustedly. She raised herself on an elbow. "What's the matter with you, Dolly?" she asked interestedly. "You seem quite different somehow."

Dolly's eyes wavered, but she laughed.

"Different! Rubbish! It's your imagination. I'm having the time of my life. Renny's been taking me all over the place."

"*That* man!" Biddy said eloquently.

"Well, and what's the matter with him?" the Big Flapper demanded. "He's a sport, and he knows everyone in town. Can I smoke?"

"I don't know if Marna would mind."

"Well, we can find that out afterwards. Marna doesn't mind anything very much, does she?"

"What do you mean?"

Dolly Benson lit a cigarette and sat down on the arm of a chair, showing an unnecessary expanse of silk stocking and smartly-gartered leg.

"Well, she goes the pace herself in a quiet way, doesn't she?"

"*Marna* does?"

"Yes, your beloved Marna. Pooh! don't look so angry. And don't tell me you don't know. I don't blame her, as I told you before, but she and Hugh Hubbard—well——!" She finished with an eloquent shrug of her shoulders.



"What about them?" the Little Flapper asked very quietly.

Dolly laughed.

"Nothing! only that they're no better than the rest of us. Renny's seen them together lots of times when they weren't supposed to be! Not that I blame them."

"I don't believe a word of it." The Little Flapper had flushed angrily and her voice trembled. "It's wicked of you to tell such lies—just because you're jealous."

"Jealous!" Dolly's voice rose shrilly. "Who am I jealous of I should like to know? You'd better be careful what you're saying, you——" She calmed down suddenly, laughed, and, taking out her lipstick, turned again to the glass. "I'm not going to quarrel," she said calmly. "Have some more tea? I shall have to go soon or I suppose Marna will come in and turn me out."

She took Biddy's empty cup and refilled it.

There was a little silence. Biddy was trembling with anger; she had never really disliked Dolly Benson until now. She was amazed to find how much people could change in a short time.

It was only a few weeks since she and the Big Flapper had met, and yet in that time it seemed to her that Dolly had changed almost beyond recognition, or else that her own tastes and affections had altered in the most astounding manner.

She cast about in her agitated mind for something to say, but before she could speak the elder girl said abruptly:

"Have you got any money, Biddy?"

"Any money? I don't know. I had a little before I was ill, but I haven't wanted any since, of course."

"Well—I suppose you could get some?"

"What do you mean?"

Dolly cast a swift glance towards the door which was safely closed.

"I'm hard up," she said, lowering her voice.

"Only just for the time being, of course. I get my allowance from the gov'nor at the end of the month, but I'm broke till then. I thought perhaps you'd lend me some. I've always paid you back before."

"I know, but——" Somehow Biddy sensed that this was different to those other times.

Often she had lent Dolly ten shillings, or even a pound, but she knew instinctively that this time such a small sum would not meet the case.

"I'll pay you back, you know that," Dolly said quickly, seeing the hesitation in Biddy's face. "It's only a loan, and I *must* have it or I shall get into an awful mess. I lost at cards, but the luck will turn, and then——"

"How much do you want?"

The Big Flapper hesitated, then she said recklessly :

"I should like forty pounds, but half that will do."

"Forty pounds!" the Little Flapper gasped. "I've never had so much money in my life. I couldn't possibly get it; besides, you can't have lost all that!"

"I've lost a darned sight more," Dolly said bitterly. "My luck's been dead out. I told you.

But I can do with twenty—and you can easily get twenty.”

“I can’t. How can I? I’ve never asked Marna for more than a pound at a time—never! She’d wonder why. It would worry her most frightfully. Besides, she wouldn’t give it to me.”

“She would; you know she would. You can make some excuse; she’d give you anything.”

Biddy shook her head.

“It would be pretending a lie, and I couldn’t do it.”

“Plaster saint!” Dolly sneered. She puffed at her cigarette savagely for a moment, then her manner changed. “Be a dear and help me,” she whispered. “It’s really dreadfully urgent. I don’t know what I shall do if you refuse. I’m in an awful mess. Be a pal, Biddy darling! I’ll never ask you again, and I’ll pay you back, honestly I will.”

“How can you? It’s such a lot of money—where will you get it from?”

“I’m bound to win some day. Renny says that the luck always changes sooner or later.”

“Renny Martin is a hateful man.”

“That’s what you think! I like him, and anyway that’s not the question. Biddy, will you do this for me?”

“I can’t.”

“You can if you like—you know you can. We’ve always been such good friends, and I wouldn’t ask you if I wasn’t in such a dreadful mess.” She rose and came closer to the bed. “Biddy, I beg of you!”

“I can’t.”

“You mean that you won’t?”

"I won't tell Marna a lie to get it."

There was a little silence, then Dolly Benson laughed and flung her half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace.

"All right. Then I shall ask Marna myself."

Biddy smiled.

"Very well, but she won't let you have it. She doesn't like Renny Martin either, and she wouldn't approve of you going about with him, or of your going to his club. If she knew you'd lost it at cards—and that he makes you play——"

"She *will* let me have it," Dolly said positively.

The Little Flapper caught her breath; something in the tone of Dolly's voice frightened her.

"*Why* will she?" she whispered.

"Because if she doesn't," the Big Flapper said calmly, "I shall tell George Paget what happened the night we all drove over to the Blairs' to dance, and I shall tell him——"

"*What* happened?" the Little Flapper demanded.

"Never mind! I know, and so does Renny——"

For a moment the two girls glared at one another, then Biddy said passionately:

"You little *beast!*"

"It's no use calling names," Dolly declared indifferently. "All's fair in love and war, and this is war. I'm in a tight corner, and if you and Marna don't help me get out of it——"

"You'll never frighten Marna with threats," Biddy said proudly.

"Shan't I? We shall see. I don't imagine she's dying for me to tell George about the day Hugh Hubbard went away for instance——"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I know she wanted to go with him, and meant to go! That she *would* have gone if something hadn't happened to prevent her." She laughed triumphantly, reading the shock in Biddy's eyes. "So much for your saintly Marna!" she said jeeringly.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XV*

THE Little Flapper lay very still, her face quite white, and her eyes blazing, then suddenly with a great effort she sprang up in bed. She threw the clothes back and was out on the floor before Dolly Benson could move or prevent her.

"You beast, you beast!" she sobbed pantingly. "After all Marna's done for you. Oh, I hate you. I hate you." She threw herself upon Dolly and beat at her with weak hands. "I hate you. I hate you."

"Little fool!" But the Big Flapper was frightened. "Go back to bed," she pleaded. "You'll make yourself ill, dreadfully ill. Go back to bed at once. If anyone comes——"

"I hope someone will. I hope someone will. I'll tell them what you've been saying, every word of it."

"I don't think you will," Dolly said calmly. She gave Biddy a little contemptuous push so that she fell back on the bed, sobbing still. "Marna's

only an ordinary woman like the rest of us," she said rather breathlessly. "I'm not blaming her. It's no business of mine what she does, only she's got to help me. Here—get into bed." She put a firm arm round the younger girl and laid her back amongst the pillows, pulling the clothes round her again. "Do you want to die?" she demanded.

"I wish *you* would," Biddy sobbed passionately.

Dolly stood at the foot of the bed, drumming her fingers on the rail, waiting impatiently for Biddy to be quiet, then she said:

"Well, I'll be off as I seem to upset you so. You can write to me and tell me what Marna says, or I'll come again in a day or two."

"I never want to see you again," Biddy sobbed.

The Big Flapper laughed.

"I don't know that I want to see you particularly," she said heartlessly. "But I suppose I shall have to. Bye-bye." And she went away, closing the door behind her.

On the stairs she encountered Marna.

"Are you going already? Isn't Biddy all right?"

Dolly hesitated, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't think she's *very* well," she said reluctantly. "She got cross with me so I thought I had better not stay in case it made her worse. I didn't *mean* to upset her."

"I'm sure you didn't," Marna said quickly. She never believed unkind things of anyone. "I'll run up to her. How do you think she is looking?"

"She doesn't look *too* frightfully strong," the Big Flapper said. There was a clever shade of wistful-

ness in her voice. "Do you mind if I say something, Mrs. Paget?"

"Of course not."

"And you won't tell Biddy I said it?"

"Why, of course not——"

"Then I believe she's worrying about something," Dolly said in a lowered voice. "I'm sure she is. She wouldn't tell me, but she might tell you—she's so fond of you."

"But what can she have to worry about?" Marna asked anxiously. "I'd do anything in the world for her. She knows that."

"She's very lucky," Dolly said.

When she had gone Marna went up to Biddy's room and found the girl pretending to sleep.

She was lying with her head half under the bed-clothes, huddled up in a forlorn little heap, and she did not stir when Marna spoke.

"Biddy, darling?"

No reply.

"Biddy, are you asleep?"

Still no reply.

Marna sat down by the window, leaning her chin in her hand. The May afternoon was drawing to a warm, golden close, and a faint breeze was stirring the scented lilacs in the park opposite.

More than a month since Hugh Hubbard went away—more than thirty days, and God alone knew how many hours.

Looking back to their last meeting it seemed a lifetime ago to Marna, and yet somehow, since the Little Flapper's illness, the days seemed to have raced away on winged feet.

"It's because I've been busy. Because I've had no time to think about myself," Marna thought. "That's how it must always be. I must keep on doing things all the time. I must never let myself have any time to look back or think."

And yet she knew she would always be looking back, always thinking, that at night she would always wake up and picture him far out at sea—perhaps awake and thinking of her, or perhaps asleep and forgetting their love.

If only she could forget also! If only one morning she could wake up and find that the sound of his name carelessly spoken by George Paget did not make her heart leap at all, or stir her pulses by one quickened throb. She wanted to forget him, she longed to forget him, and yet she knew the futility of such a longing. He was part of her life—the very heart and soul of her, without which she would cease to exist.

And they might never meet again. She might never again see the grave, worshipping smile in his eyes, never feel the touch of his hand.

"I can't bear it. I can't bear it," she told herself, but she knew that she must.

That was the tragedy of life—that one could never go back, or even cease to be—one must just go on—on blindly. She pushed the thought from her and rose to her feet; she felt somehow angry with Biddy for sleeping and leaving her to her thoughts; she dreaded them so much.

"Biddy!" she said again, almost imploringly, and this time the Little Flapper looked up from under the bedclothes, her face all flushed and tearwet.



"I wasn't really asleep," she said.

"And you've been crying!" Marna was beside her in a moment, petting her, scolding her, stroking her hair. "What have you been crying about, you baby? What is the matter? Tell me what is the matter, Biddy?"

"I can't. I can't." Biddy wept, but she put her arms round Marna's neck tightly. "I love you so much. I'd just die for you," she sobbed.

"And that's what you will do if you keep on upsetting yourself like this," Marna said with pretended severity. "Biddy, stop crying at once, or I'll go away and leave you. Stop crying and then tell me what you've been crying about. If it's anything to do with Dolly, she——"

"It isn't, oh, it isn't."

"Then what is it? Tell me. Biddy, haven't you always told me everything?"

"You know I have."

"Then tell me this."

"You'll be angry. You'll never trust me again."

"Trust you?" Marna tried to raise her, to see her face. "Biddy, what have you been doing?"

"I can't tell you. It's nothing."

"It's not like you to cry for nothing, Biddy——"

"I'm tired. My head aches."

Marna ignored the excuse; there was an anxious light in her pretty eyes.

"It's nothing to do with Dolly?" she urged again.

"No, no."

"To do with me?"

"Oh, no."

"To do with somebody else then?"

No answer.

Marna unclasped the girl's arms from her neck.

"Biddy, if you don't tell me how can I help you?"

"I'm afraid to tell you."

"Afraid—of *me*?"

"You've always been so good to me."

"Is that a reason for being afraid, Biddy?"

"Yes, because this time I can't explain——"

The Little Flapper was desperate. In her weak state she exaggerated the importance of everything Dolly had said. She only knew that Marna's happiness was threatened, and it was more than she could bear.

"Oh, don't be angry with me, darling," she implored again.

Marna took her hand, holding it gently.

"Biddy, have you fallen in love with anyone?" she asked with an effort. The dread had been in her mind ever since the night when George had remarked upon Hugh and the Little Flapper dancing together.

George had said in his blunt way:

"Make a good-lookin' pair, eh, don't they? Of course he's too old for her, but she might do worse. He'd be kind to her, at any rate."

So many times since had Marna recalled those words, and wondered! The Little Flapper was romantic, she knew, and she had always looked particularly happy when Hugh Hubbard was anywhere about.

Too old for her, of course, but as George had said—he would be kind!

Kind! Marna knew the truth of that statement

only too well, and something seemed to rise from her heart, choking her, so that she let Biddy's hand go, and got up and walked away to the window, sudden bitter tears in her eyes.

Some day there would be another woman in his life; some day she would hear from him: "I am sorry—but——"

He had sworn that nobody would ever take her place in his heart, but men changed so quickly.

"It's more than I can expect—it's horribly selfish of me," Marna told herself passionately, and yet she felt that if ever she heard that Hugh was to be married, it would kill her.

"That's how I feel, but I don't suppose it would really," she thought drearily. "I should just go on living; hating everything, but living just the same."

"Marna!"

With an effort Marna turned and went back to the Little Flapper.

"Of course I'm not in love," Biddy said chokingly. "Who is there to be in love with except John Blair, and he's only a boy, and I don't like boys."

"She doesn't say that she doesn't like men," Marna thought jealously, then pushed the thought from her, ashamed.

"I was only chaffing, dear," she said gently. "You see if you haven't fallen in love I can't think of anything else that can be troubling you. Love and money seem to be the only two great troubles in the world," she added cynically.

There was a little silence, then Biddy said:

"It's money."

"Money!" Marna looked amazed. "What *do* you mean, Biddy?"

"I can't explain." The Little Flapper's blue eyes were tragic. "I told you I couldn't—I told you——"

"Do you mean that you owe somebody some money?" Marna asked.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me what it is for?"

"No."

"How much is it, Biddy?"

"Oh, a dreadful lot—I'm afraid to tell you."

Marna felt as if she were dreaming; she could not imagine that Biddy could owe money to anyone. Everything was always paid for her, and she had never once exceeded her pocket money. With an effort she controlled herself.

"Is it five pounds, Biddy?" she asked.

"It's more."

"Ten, then?"

No answer, but the Little Flapper's head sank lower till her face was hidden.

"Twenty, Biddy?"

But even though she asked the question Marna could have laughed. What could Biddy want with twenty pounds? To whom could she possibly owe such a sum?

"It's forty," the Little Flapper whispered.

There was a blank silence, then Marna said faintly:

"Forty pounds! Oh, Biddy, what have you been doing?"

"I can't tell you."

Marna pushed the hair back from her forehead with a little bewildered gesture.

Forty pounds! She sought in vain for some likely explanation of the mystery.

Could it be clothes? But Biddy had everything she wanted in that way—everything she wanted in every other way as well. Then suddenly out of the far away past Marna visualized the ill-tempered, much made-up woman who had been the Little Flapper's mother.

Could it be some relative who had discovered where the child was, and who was worrying her for money?

But the idea seemed absurd; besides, Biddy would have told her; Biddy was neither secretive nor deceitful.

The Little Flapper was sobbing again.

"I knew you'd be angry. I knew you'd think I'd done something dreadful."

"I don't think anything of the sort, Biddy darling," Marna said rather painfully. She felt hurt. Biddy's love was almost more to her than anything in the world, and this seemed to have built a sort of barricade between them, to have spoilt the happy understanding that had always existed. "I don't think anything of the sort," she said again. "If you feel you can't tell me, I'm content to trust you and not ask. But if you cry so you'll be ill again. Biddy, stop crying."

"I wish I could be ill. I wish I *could* die," Biddy sobbed.

She was upset and almost hysterical, and it was only with great difficulty that Marna succeeded in soothing her.

"And you love me just the same. It hasn't altered anything," Biddy implored over and over again.

"Of course not. It's just the same—everything!" Marna promised.

And at last the Little Flapper fell asleep, her face all flushed and wet with tears.

Marna sat with her for some time, her thoughts troubled, her heart full of dismay.

What could have happened? What could be the explanation?

"I haven't brought her up as I ought to have done," she upbraided herself. "I've been selfish. I've left her too much. I've thought too much of myself. After all, she's young; she's got all her life before her, and mine—what does mine matter, after all?"

She heard her husband's voice downstairs and she tiptoed out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

It was quite dusk, and the sunset had faded.

Paget stood at the foot of the staircase, his handsome face all smiles.

"So there you are! Thought you'd run away and left me," he said cheerily. "Been callin'! Didn't you hear me?"

"No. I was with Biddy. George, I don't think she's so well to-day."

"Pooh! Your imagination. Let me see her."

"She's asleep."

Marna went down to him and he put an arm round her.

"She's in trouble about something, George."

Paget did not take it seriously.

"In love," he said lightly. "That won't hurt her. She'll be in love dozens of times before she finds the right chap, eh, what?"

Marna's heart contracted.

"There's nobody she can be in love with," she said rather breathlessly.

Her husband laughed.

"There's Hugh," he said. "I've always had my own ideas, don't cher know?" He drew his wife into the drawing-room. "Don't you worry your little head about it, anyway," he said fondly.

"But I must. She belongs to me. Of course I must worry."

Paget frowned. There were still times when he was acutely jealous of the Little Flapper.

"Well, we can't bring Hubbard back," he said rather shortly.

"No." There was a little catch in Marna's voice. Bring him back! If only such a miracle were possible.

"And you're as thin as a shadow," George went on. "You've done too much for Biddy since she's been ill. Ought to have had a nurse. You'll be ill next. Mrs. Blair was only sayin' last night——"

Marna interrupted impatiently:

"Mrs. Blair imagines things. I'm quite all right."

"Mrs. Blair's a jolly sensible woman," Paget declared. He bent and kissed his wife. "Love me?" he asked.

"Of course," but Marna's voice was absent, and he sighed.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She looked up at him.

"George, if Biddy asked you for some money—a lot of money—and no questions to be asked, what would you do?"

Paget chuckled.

"Give it to her, of course," he said easily. "She's all right. Nothing wrong about the Little Flapper." He seemed struck by the gravity of his wife's face. "Why do you ask?" he inquired.

Marna told him.

He listened seriously, then he whistled.

"Humph! sounds queer, but I don't expect it is. Give it to her. Believe in trustin' people myself till you find out that they can't be trusted, and Biddy's straight enough."

"I know, but I keep remembering her mother, and what she came from——"

"Can't blame the poor kid for that."

"I'm not, but it's only—— If she would just tell me what she wants the money for?"

"She'll tell you some day," Paget said easily.

"Never cross a bridge till you get to it, eh?"

"Then shall I let her have the money?"

"'Course!"

Paget had complete faith in his womenfolk; he had complete faith in all the world.

Marna drew away from him with a little shiver.

"Well, if *you* say so," she said slowly.



ANOTHER fortnight slipped uneventfully away. The Little Flapper got well, and no further allusion was made to the forty pounds. Marna gave it to her in banknotes—laid it on her dressing-table one night in an envelope with her name just written on the outside, and the Little Flapper wrote her thanks.

“I wish I could explain—perhaps some day I shall be able to. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, darling. I give you my word of honour it isn’t.”

Marna believed her, but she never ceased to wonder. Often she found herself watching the girl with a new vague suspicion; often she questioned her closely when she had been out alone, and instantly regretted doing so.

“She’ll think I don’t trust her. How hateful of me! I do trust her. I know she’s all right really.”

She tried hard to believe that the incident had made no difference to their complete understanding, and she knew that Biddy was trying to believe the same thing and failing.

The little rift had been made in the lute and could not be closed.

Renny Martin, who had stayed away from the house since Biddy’s illness, renewed his visits.

“Heard from Hubbard yet?” he asked Marna sometimes, and always she had to force herself to smile and to answer as naturally as she could :

" Oh no, there hasn't been time yet."

Then one day he told her he had some news for her. She looked up, startled.

" What sort of news? "

Her thoughts had flown at once to Hugh, and yet how could Martin have heard anything from him?

" Saunders has had a cable from his sister," Renny Martin said.

It was so sudden and unexpected that Marna had no time to control herself and she knew that her face was white.

" A cable! Oh! " Then instantly she recovered and tried to laugh. " What extravagance! Is anything the matter? "

" She is going to be married."

Marna was mistress of herself again now, but her heart was thudding at suffocating speed.

" Married! How romantic! She wasn't engaged when she left England, was she? "

" No. It's some man she met on the boat he tells me."

" Oh! that so often happens, doesn't it? "

She knew that he was watching her closely and she hated him for the pain which she knew he was deliberately trying to give her.

" Who is the lucky man? " she forced herself to ask.

" Saunders didn't seem to know." Renny Martin rose and came over to where she stood. " I suggested it might be Hubbard—it wouldn't be altogether surprising, would it? Saunders' sister is an attractive girl, and you know what it is on a long voyage—moonlight, and all the rest of it."

"Yes."

"They might do worse, both of them," Saunders said coolly.

George Paget came into the room at that moment; he frowned when he saw Martin and Marna together, but he spoke in his usual cheery way.

"Hullo, you two! Plottin' mischief?"

Marna turned round.

"Renny has been telling me that Mr. Saunders has had a cable from his sister. She is to be married to some man she met on the boat."

Paget dropped his eyeglass with a little click.

"Not old Hugh?" he said uproariously.

Marna caught her breath hard.

Why did George suggest such a thing? It hurt her far more than Martin's words had done.

"Saunders didn't know the name," Martin explained. "But it might be Hubbard. I was just saying to Marna that all sorts of things happen on shipboard, eh?"

Paget chuckled.

"Yes, by Jove! Remember myself before I was married—there was a little widow comin' back from Bombay——"

Marna slipped away.

She had heard all about that little widow from Bombay many times before and had never been in the least jealous, but her pulses were racing and she felt that she could hardly breathe as she went up to her room and shut the door.

Lately the pain had not been so hard to bear—lately, she had tried to realize the futility of suffering for a thing which could not be cured but only endured, and

she had fondly imagined that she was succeeding, and now she was back again in the bitter throes of jealousy.

It might be true! Why should not Hugh marry if he wished to? And as Martin had said, Saunders' sister was a pretty girl, and at sea people were thrown together so much, and if there was a moon——

Marna laughed bitterly.

Was that all constancy was worth?

Then she tried to be just to Hubbard.

After all, there was no proof; there must have been many other men on the boat and no name had been mentioned in the cable. Besides, Hugh belonged to her—had said that there would never be another woman in his life.

She tried hard to cling to that memory, but it was difficult.

Hugh was free, but she was tied for life. The pendulum of faith and jealousy swung to and fro torturously in her mind. He had been faithful to her before for all those years—why should he forget her now after only a few weeks?

"I don't care if he has," she told herself passionately, but the pain was like a physical thing at her heart.

She remembered that he had avoided saying good-bye to her before he went away. What had that meant? At the time she had thought it meant that he could not bear another farewell, but perhaps it had been from another motive altogether.

She found herself walking up and down the room, her cheeks burning, her hands clasped together so hard that her nails cut into her flesh.

"I don't care! Why should I care if he doesn't? I'll forget him if he has forgotten me. I'll let him see I don't care any more." She laughed aloud, and then bit her lip, shocked at the recklessness of that laugh.

How could she forget him? He was a part of her life, of her very being.

She covered her face with her hands and found herself whispering desolately: "Don't forget me, dear—oh, don't forget me, Hugh."

George Paget came knocking at the door.

"What are you doin', Marna?" He knocked again. "Let me in. Why do you lock the door?"

She opened it, trying hard to smile.

"What do you want? I'm sorry. I didn't know I had locked the door."

He looked at her with puzzled anxiety.

"What did ye go away for? I was just tellin' Martin about the little widow from Bombay."

"I know, but I'd heard it before."

He flushed boyishly.

"Fed up with my stories, eh? Sorry, but you needn't have run away."

Marna averted her head.

"I'm tired. Renny Martin tires me."

"Does he? Does he really?" He looked pathetically pleased. "Glad to hear that, Marna. I've thought lately——" He broke off, ashamed to speak of his reluctant jealousy. He encircled her with his arms. "Well, if you're tired you won't want to go to-night," he said.

"To go where?" She wanted to be left alone; she felt as if she must take him by his great shoulders

and turn him out of the room, out of her life. Loneliness, anything would be better than the constant reminder that she belonged to him and could never get free.

Then she was ashamed. He was too good for her—she was not worthy of his love. She slipped a hand through his arm.

“Where do you want me to go, George?”

“It’s Martin’s idea. There’s a gala night at the Star Club—all the girls from the Gaiety show are going! Thought it would be fun.”

“Would you like to go?” Marna asked.

Paget rubbed the back of his head and laughed boyishly.

“Well, it would be bright, eh, what?” he asked.

“Very well, we’ll go.”

“Not if you’re tired,” he said quickly.

“I’m not tired. I’m not nearly so tired when there are things going on as I am when we’re quiet and alone.”

But the evening was a nightmare.

Marna wore a new dress and many diamonds.

“By Jove, we’re smart to-night!” Paget said admiringly. He loved to see Marna wearing her diamonds. “Who do you expect to see at the Star?” he demanded jokingly.

“She looks beautiful,” Biddy said.

“You ought not to be coming, Biddy,” Renny Martin put in. “Little Flappers who have been ill ought to go to bed early.”

“That’s for me to say, and I told her she might come,” Marna said sharply.

Everything was getting on her nerves. If she could

have done as she wished she would have flown away into the darkness by herself and walked and walked for miles till from sheer weariness she slept.

Even Harnigan irritated her by his attention.

"I'm not cold. I don't want the rug," she snapped at him. "And why aren't the windows opened. It's stifling."

"It's raining, darling," the Little Flapper said gently.

"Well, a little rain won't hurt us," Marna answered. She leaned back in the car and closed her eyes.

All day long she had been saying to herself: "It's all over. Hugh's going to be married. Hugh's going to be married."

"If I say it often enough I shall get used to it and it won't seem so bad," she thought hopelessly, but each time it was like a knife being turned in an open wound.

The dance floor at the Star Club was crowded. People danced on one another's toes and bumped together at the corners.

The atmosphere was hot and the band seemed noisy and tuneless.

"Toppin', isn't it?" Paget said half a dozen times.

He always enjoyed a crowd and many lights and a loud band. He loved being amongst pretty women, although he told Marna that there was nobody in the room who could hold a candle to her.

"Too much paint and powder," he said. "Don't like it."

"Paint is an improvement to most women," she

answered unkindly, "I'm thinking about taking to it myself."

He looked at her with grave, hurt eyes.

"What's the matter with you to-night, darling?"

Marna looked up at him and thought crazily: "Shall I tell him the truth? Shall I put an end to the whole miserable pretence once and for all and tell him the truth?" but she knew she could not.

"There's nothing the matter," she said. She laughed and held out her hand to Renny Martin. "Come and dance," she said.

Paget and the Little Flapper were left alone at the supper-table, but the eyes of both of them followed Marna as Martin swept her into the crowd of dancers.

"Loves dancin', doesn't she, eh, what?" Paget asked with an effort.

"Yes," said Biddy.

"Martin dances well, eh?" Paget said again after a moment.

"I'd rather dance with you," Biddy said.

"Bless your heart!" He squeezed her hand and then leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "There's somethin' wrong to-night," he said in a puzzled sort of way. "I ought to be enjoyin' myself and I'm not."

"It's hot and crowded," Biddy said.

"It's been hotter and more crowded before," answered George Paget.

His eyes followed his wife round the room. She was very pale—scarcely less white than her gown, but she was laughing extravagantly.

"Never thought Martin much of a humorist,"



Paget said, then he tried to laugh, as he added loyally: "Glad to see Marna enjoyin' herself."

When the dance was ended, instead of coming back to their table, Martin asked Marna if she would go upstairs to the roof garden. It was a glorious night with a pale crescent moon in a clear sky, and a soft wind blowing.

London lay far below, carpeted with a myriad lights.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Marna said. She leaned her arms on the parapet and looked down.

"Yes." Martin was close beside her; after a moment he put his arm round her waist. "It's wonderful to be alone with you," he said.

Marna closed her eyes with a little shiver.

If only it had been Hugh, she thought wildly, and then was quickly ashamed.

She was behaving like a lovesick girl—and she was a married woman, no longer even very young.

"You're not angry with me," Renny Martin said, and she laughed.

Angry! Why should she be angry? What did anything matter? Nothing *did* matter! Not even the dear, kind man downstairs who loved her so devotedly—not even the Little Flapper who lately seemed to have gone so far away from her.

"Why do you laugh?" Martin asked, and she turned and looked up at him, the pale moonlight on her face.

"I'm thinking how stupid life really is," she said directly. "All sorts of desires and emotions are put into our hearts which we are not allowed to gratify, or if we do, the world calls us sinners."

"Why mind what the world says?"

She looked away from him to the myriad of twinkling lights below.

"Perhaps because I am a coward," she answered.

They were silent for a moment, then suddenly he bent and kissed her arm.

"I love you more than *he* does, Marna," he said hoarsely.

She started violently, drawing away from him with a little shudder.

"I don't know what you mean—what you are talking about. Let us go back to the others."

"Not yet. You always avoid me, and now we have a moment alone——"

"I don't want to be alone with you, and George will be wondering why we are so long——"

He laughed unpleasantly.

"If I were Hubbard it would be a different story, I suppose."

"Please let me go."

"You are cruel to me, Marna."

"I don't want to be. I just want to be let alone. Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Because I love you!"

She made a little movement of distaste.

"You've loved so many women, Renny," she said with a touch of contempt.

"And you have only ever loved one man, is that what you mean? Why do you waste your time thinking of Hubbard? He will have forgotten you long ago."

"Please let me go."

Marna wondered why she was not angry nor

frightened, but she was neither. This man left her utterly unmoved now save that he wearied her. She wanted to be alone; she would love to have been alone up here in the stillness of the night with London at her feet, free to fight with her own unhappy thoughts and subdue them.

"If Hubbard never comes back——" Martin said savagely.

Marna's calm suddenly broke; she turned on him with passionate anger:

"Why do you say such things? What is Hugh Hubbard to me? You tell me yourself that he is going to be married. I hate you when you say such things. I suppose you think it hurts me; well it does not! I don't care about anything any more—nothing matters—you can say what you like, do what you like—all of you, I——"

She flung her arms wide with a gesture of weary despair, and with a swift movement Renny Martin caught her to him.

"If I *could* only say what I like! Tell you how I love you! Marna, can't you be just a little kind to me? Can't you——" He broke off with a smothered exclamation as George Paget appeared suddenly in the doorway before them that led up from the ball-room below.

There was a moment of blank silence, then Martin let Marna go and moved back a step, shrugging his shoulders.

"That was unlucky!" he said coolly.

Paget came forward; his fists were clenched and his face was white.

"He will kill him," Marna thought, but it only

seemed like a dream. She wanted to move forward, to step between the two men, but her feet seemed chained, and Renny Martin said again calmly, a detestable smile on his face :

“ That was unlucky, George ! Don’t be mad about it. It was the moonlight that went to our heads.”

“ Went to your heads ! Do you dare to insinuate that my wife——”

Marna moved then ; she ran to her husband and clung to his arm.

“ George ! listen to me ! Don’t be foolish ! It was nothing—you must know it was nothing—just silliness ! Oh, please don’t make a scene here—remember Biddy——”

He turned on her like an enraged giant.

“ Biddy ! Did *you* remember her a moment ago ? ”

“ George—dear George——” But he was past listening. His vague jealousy of weeks past had burst into fire at last, and there was murder in his eyes as he looked at Renny Martin.

“ Hound ! You despicable hound ! ”

Martin shrugged his shoulders. He was pale, but otherwise he appeared quite unmoved.

“ I rather think you’re barging up the wrong tree, old fellow,” he said. “ You do me the honour of being jealous of me, but wouldn’t it be better if you turned your attention to Hugh Hubbard ? Or do you think he is too far away ? ”

There was a tragic silence. Paget stood like a man turned to stone, then suddenly he seemed to awaken ; he lunged forward and struck Martin a terrific blow between the eyes.

Marna screamed.

"George! George, I beg of you."

But it was as if a child clung to him; he put her aside as easily as if she had been a doll.

"Let me go! Stand away or you'll get hurt! I've waited for this for weeks. I've always guessed—known. Now then, you cringing hound——"

Marna fled towards the stairs. In the doorway she met two men.

"Stop them! He'll kill him. Oh, I beg of you—it's all a mistake," she panted incoherently.

One of the men knew her well.

"Why, Mrs. Paget——"

"It's George and Renny Martin—they've quarrelled. Oh, stop them. George will kill him."

The two men passed her hurriedly and went on to the roof garden. "You go down—keep away," they told her.

Marna went back to the ball-room. Biddy had just finished a dance with John Blair.

"Wish I'd known you were coming, Mrs. Paget," he said as Marna joined them. "I only came along at the last minute. Is Mr. Paget here?"

"Yes, but we're just going home. Biddy, we must go home at once. Fetch your wrap and mine. George will come presently——"

"But, Marna——"

"At once, Biddy."

John Blair looked distressed.

"Is anything the matter? Anything I can do?"

"If you'd find Harnigan. He may not be here, as I told him not to come till two. If he's not there please get me a taxi."

Biddy came back with the wraps; she gave a swift

glance at Marna but asked no questions. She knew that something dreadful had happened. When they were driving away in the taxi Marna told her a little about it.

"George quarrelled with Renny Martin and knocked him down." She shivered at the memory. Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and began to sob. "Oh, I wish I were dead. I wish I were dead." The Little Flapper did not know what to say; she sat very still with her eyes closed. Lately life had seemed a riddle far beyond her understanding. When they got home she went to her own room, leaving Marna alone.

"I'll come if you want me," she said, but she knew Marna did not want her.

The Little Flapper went to her own room and sat down on the bed, not attempting to undress.

It seemed an eternity before she heard Paget come home. She heard the opening and shutting of the front door, and then for some time she heard him moving about downstairs. At last he came up.

Biddy went to the door and peeped out. She saw him go straight to his dressing-room. She waited for some time, then she undressed and crept shivering into bed.

Marna had not undressed. There was a fire lit in her room for the May nights were still chilly, and she sat close beside it, her eyes fixed on the flames. She tried to think, but her head felt muddled and confused.

She could only remember what Martin had said:

"You do me the honour of being jealous of me—

but wouldn't it be better if you turned your attention to Hugh Hubbard, or do you think he is too far away? "

What else had he said after she left them?

Well, it did not matter much; nothing mattered.

She heard her husband come upstairs and go into his dressing-room, but she still waited.

She had not locked the door and every minute she expected to hear him trying the handle, but the time went by and he did not come. She looked at the clock—it was past two! An hour and a half since she came back from the Star Club.

Was anything the matter with him? Had he been hurt?

She softly opened the door which led between the two rooms and spoke her husband's name:

"George!"

"Well?"

It was quite dark and she groped along the wall and found the switch. Then she saw him sitting on the bed in his shirt sleeves, staring before him. He did not even look up when she entered and she went swiftly to him.

"Oh, are you hurt?"

He raised his handsome head slowly at that and laughed mirthlessly.

"*Hurt!* Do you think that hound could hurt me, eh, what?"

"I was afraid, that was all."

"Afraid!" His eyes scanned her face. "Why were you afraid?"

"That you had been hurt."

"Oh! Thought perhaps it was somethin' else."

He looked like a big, overgrown boy, and Marna's heart was tender towards him.

"What else could it be?" she asked.

He did not move or answer for some time, then he caught her by both arms, pulling her almost roughly towards him.

"How much truth is there in what he said?" he demanded thickly.

She caught her breath sharply.

"What do you mean? What did he say?"

"You heard. About you and—Hubbard."

"Do you believe what he said, George?"

"I'm askin' you to tell me the truth. I'll believe you, you know I will."

"Well?" If only her brain would work, but she felt as if something clogged it, keeping it at a standstill. "Well—ask me what you want to know," she managed to say.

Paget rose to his feet, still holding her by both arms.

"He said that you and Hugh—oh, damnation! I can't tell you. He said things that a decent man can't repeat to his wife. He said— God! I wish I'd broken his blasted neck," he broke out in sudden passion. "Hugh's my friend—been my best friend all his life, and he said that you and he—you and he—been behind my back—meetin', and things like that! In love with each other—my wife and my best friend——" He let her go suddenly and turned away, covering his face with big, shaking hands.

"Know such things do happen, of course," he said brokenly. "But you never bring 'em home to your-



self, I suppose. Doesn't seem possible. I've always done my best for you—never thought the earth good enough for you."

"Oh, George! George!"

He turned round swiftly.

"Isn't it true? I'll believe you whatever you say. I know Martin's a lying hound, and I know you're the whitest woman who ever lived. I adore you, Marna, you know that. I'm not clever, or anything to be proud of, but I'd give my life for you."

"Oh—oh!" Marna sobbed.

She was shamed to the depths of her soul by his sincerity and simplicity. At that moment she would have given half her life for the power to tear Hugh Hubbard out of her heart, and yet she knew she could not. She would always love him because she could not help it; she would never forget him because the day of miracles was at an end, but at least she could *pretend!*

"Isn't it true?" Paget asked again. He was almost sobbing. He bent over her, his face broken with grief, but he did not touch her. "I'll ask pardon on my knees if it's not true, Marna. Ought not to have believed it at all, I know, but somehow—well, I was mad with jealousy, don't cher know——"

He laid his hands on her shoulders now, surprisingly gentle hands for all their bigness.

"Do you—is it—is it Hubbard you want, Marna, and not me?"

The tears were running down Marna's face and she felt as if her heart was breaking. She shut her eyes before the tragedy of George Paget's as she answered him in a whisper:

“ Oh, you *know* it's not! ”

“ Marna! ” He dropped clumsily to his knees before her, his arms round her waist. “ Forgive me, Marna. I've been a fool—but that swine was so sure, swore he could prove it! I wish I'd killed him. I *will* kill him if he ever comes here again. He might have ruined both our lives—might have smashed everythin' up, don't cher know! But now I'm so happy. Lord, I could cry with happiness, only I know you'd think I'm a fool. So I *am* a fool—about you, anyway. Kiss me and say you love me. Put your arms round my neck, Marna. Kiss me, Marna—oh, my darling——”

Marna had slipped fainting into his arms.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XVII*

LIFE went on. Nothing much happened and yet so much seemed to happen that the Little Flapper found herself bewildered.

Everyone tried to behave as if no thought of tragedy had entered into the happy routine of life, and the very pretence but deepened it.

Renny Martin had left London, and for some time Dolly Benson had not been to the house.

The weather had turned suddenly and unexpectedly warm, and there were swelling buds on the trees in the park, and clear sunny skies smiling down on London.

George Paget seemed to be almost his old cheery self. He was devoted to Marna. It seemed as if he could not sufficiently atone for his jealous suspicions.

"I ought to be kicked for it," he told her more than once in self-abasement. "Don't know what possessed me. I'm not naturally a Bluebeard, am I? I don't deserve to be forgiven—it's not many women who would forgive me, I know."

"Let us forget all about it," Marna pleaded. "You were not to blame any more than I was."

But George could not let it rest. He was bitterly ashamed of himself.

"Can't imagine what old Hugh would say if he knew," he said once wretchedly. "He'd think I'd taken leave of my senses, don't cher know! Can't think what possessed me——"

"He's never likely to know," Marna said with an effort. "And it's no business of his——"

"No, no! Course not!" George Paget paced up and down the room, a little frown on his usually smiling face. "Can't think why he doesn't write," he said in a puzzled way. "Never was much of a correspondent, of course, but he might write now and then."

"What does it matter if he writes or not? Didn't you tell me he was going to be married? If he is that would account for it. He's too busy."

"By Jove, yes!" Paget beamed at his wife. "Fancy old Hugh married, after all! I say, shall we send him a cable?"

"Whatever for?" Marna asked sharply. "It's no business of ours, anyway, and besides, it may not be true." She controlled herself with an effort,

and tried to laugh. "What does it matter to us if he is going to be married or not?"

"Thought you might be interested. Thought you liked Hugh," Paget submitted slowly.

"So I do, so I do, but—oh, George, if only you would talk about something else!"

Paget apologized humbly and changed the conversation, but he kept looking at his wife in wistful bewilderment.

He was like a strong oak tree in whose gallant heart a canker had begun to grow and could not be killed.

That same evening, although he had meant to keep his trouble so strictly to himself, he found himself inadvertently confiding in the Little Flapper.

Marna had gone to bed pleading headache, and Paget and Bidy were alone by the drawing-room fire.

Bidy had tried to read and given it up, she had tried to work at a jumper she was making and had given that up also, and now she sat on her favourite humpty stool by the fire, her chin in her hands, almost painfully conscious of Paget's dejection. It was so unlike him to sit hunched up in his chair and silent; she felt as if there was a third unseen presence in the room with them casting a spell on the happiness they had known.

Presently she spoke:

"What's the matter, Uncle George?"

Paget started, sighed, and tried to laugh.

"Got the blues a bit," he admitted. "I shall be all right to-morrow. Don't like Marna being ill—hate the house when she's not somewhere about."

"She's only got a headache, dear," Bidy said tremulously. "She'll be all right to-morrow, too."

Paget shook his handsome head.

"She's not been all right for weeks—months! Looks ill! Looks rottenly ill. Mrs. Blair notices it, I can see, and she's no fool. I like that woman for all her queer clothes and strong-minded opinions. Haven't you noticed it, Biddy? Come now, I'm sure you have."

"Marna tired herself out nursing me when I was ill."

He shook his head.

"'Tisn't only that she's tired," he insisted. "She's not the same woman she used to be." He rose to his feet and began pacing the room restlessly. "There's something between us," he broke out with sudden eloquence. "We used to be so happy! You know how perfectly happy we were, Biddy. And now it's all changed. Dare say it's my fault. I'm a blundering fellow, and Marna's just the sweetest— Know I'm not half good enough for her. It'd serve me right if she grew to hate me—lots of women would for less than I said to her the other night."

"Oh, Uncle George! As if anyone could ever hate you."

"They could!" he declared gloomily. "I made a fool of myself. I behaved like a jealous fool, and—well—there was no cause. She never cared for Renny Martin. I might have known that she never did. The fellow just pestered her with his beastly attentions. If he ever comes here again I'll break his damned neck for him."

The Little Flapper laughed. She was immensely relieved. It was all right if George was only jealous

of Renny Martin; she had dreaded to hear another name.

"As if Marna would ever look at a man like that," she said scornfully.

"I know. I was a fool to ever believe it. I don't believe I ever really did, but when the brute dragged Hugh's name in——"

"Oh!" said the Little Flapper softly.

"Hugh's a different matter," Paget blundered on agitatedly. "He's a man, if you like! The sort of fellow any woman would take a fancy to, eh, what? Don't you think so, Biddy?"

"Yes."

"Oh! you do think so, do you?" Paget came to a standstill in front of the Little Flapper's humpty stool, and glowered down at her very much as a mastiff glares at a kitten.

Somehow that little word of admission had been so eloquent; almost like fresh fuel thrown on to the smouldering fire of the jealousy which he could not quite extinguish. He remembered that he had once thought the Little Flapper was in love with Hubbard; he remembered that even Dolly Benson had almost admitted to an infatuation for him. Why, then, should Marna be any different?

"Biddy?" he said sharply.

"Well?" But she did not look up.

"Look at me," Paget commanded.

The Little Flapper slowly raised her eyes, hot and troubled.

"Do you think—do you know—oh, hang it all! if you know anything——" Paget said agitatedly.

"You wouldn't make a fool of me, Biddy, would

you? I've always been straight with you—always been straight with everyone as far as I could. If there's anything in what Renny said—you'd tell me, wouldn't you? You'd be honest——"

Biddy rose to her feet and took his hand in both hers.

"Silly! silly!" she cried. "What are you imagining now? What is there for me to tell you? Oh, Uncle George, don't be such a Bluebeard."

She was terrified because she knew that something in her face or manner had aroused his suspicions once again; she laughed and teased him and scolded him till the ugly look of doubt left his eyes and he laughed with her.

"We all want a holiday," he said rather hoarsely. "We're all gettin' on each other's nerves, eh what? Would you like a holiday, Biddy? Where would you like to go?"

Biddy let him talk. It gave her breathing time, but she knew that the danger which had been threatening them all since Hugh Hubbard came home was drawing nearer.

Later she tried timidly to warn Marna, but Marna was unapproachable.

"I'm tired. Leave me alone——" She so often said that now when the Little Flapper went to her room, or attempted any caress. But one night about a month after the dance at the Star Club, Biddy woke suddenly to the feeling that someone was in the room with her, and when she sat up in bed with a little gasp of fear, Marna spoke to her through the silence:

"It's all right, Biddy. Don't be frightened. I just came to see if you were asleep."

"Marna! You woke me. What's the time, darling?"

"It's not late. Only just half-past twelve, but George isn't in yet, and I can't sleep."

The Little Flapper was wide awake now; she groped beside the bed and put on the light.

Marna was standing beside her in her dressing-gown. She looked white and tired, and yet her eyes were so bright—brighter than the Little Flapper could remember having seen them before.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked quickly.

"No, nothing. I wanted to talk to you, that's all. I'm sorry if I woke you."

She sat down on the side of the bed and Biddy wrapped the quilt round her.

"You'll get so cold," she scolded. "Your hands are like ice as it is."

She felt very happy. It was so long since Marna had come to her room for one of the old beloved talks; it almost seemed as if the shadowy days were wiped out and forgotten.

"I'm glad I woke up," she said. "I'm glad you came."

"Yes. Biddy——" But for some minutes Marna did not go on, then she said almost painfully: "Do you remember I once told you that if ever there was anything you could do for me, I would let you know."

"Yes."

"Well, there is something I want you to do for me now."



"You know I will."

"Thank you." Marna shivered a little. "It's nothing very much. It's only to promise—if anything should happen to me—I don't mean that it's going to—but if it should—I want you to promise to send a letter for me—to—to Mr. Hubbard."

"Yes."

There was a little silence, then Marna went on :

"You need not feel shocked, Biddy—there's nothing in it to be ashamed of, and if he ever gets it I shan't be here, so it won't matter—it won't matter what anyone thinks any more. Only I don't want George to be hurt—he's hurt already. That's the worst of life. Things can't happen to you without hurting other people too."

The Little Flapper lay very still, but she knew perfectly what Marna meant.

Marna took Biddy's hand and held it between her own.

"You needn't be frightened," she went on quietly, "or imagine that anything dreadful is going to happen just because I ask you to promise this. But I—Biddy, can I tell you something without frightening you?"

"I shan't be frightened," the Little Flapper said, but her heart was shaking.

The silence was unbroken for some minutes before Marna spoke again.

"I went to see a doctor to-day—no, not Dr. Liscard—a bigger man than he is—a heart specialist, Biddy."

She felt the girl's hand jerk convulsively, and she held it more tightly as she went on :

"I think I've known for some time that my heart wasn't as strong as it should be. It's silly, but—well, it's not my fault. I suppose I'm weak—I know I can't be brave and stand up to things as some women do. I wish I could. I've got so much to be thankful for. We're rich, and I've got George and you. I know that everyone thinks I'm really what you've always called me, the 'Luckiest Lady.' But there's something I haven't got—something I want so much——" Her voice broke, and when she went on again there was a little frantic note in it. "I despise myself much more than you or anyone else can despise me, Biddy. I've tried so hard to put him out of my life—I've tried so hard to be happy and I can't, and that's all there is about it. Sometimes people with money and everything else they want have to fight with life just as much as people who are poor and have nothing, and I've had to fight like that, Biddy, and I suppose life has beaten me."

"Oh, Marna!"

"I know, but it's nothing to mind, really. I don't mind at all, so you mustn't. Biddy, are you crying? Don't cry! I may go on living for years and years."

"We must tell Uncle George—of course he must be told," Biddy sobbed.

Marna let the girl's hand go almost angrily.

"He must never know. I couldn't bear it if he did, and besides, what's the use of hurting him any more? I hate myself already because he guesses something, or thinks he does. Not that there's anything to guess——"

Her voice dragged away into silence again, and for a long time neither of them spoke. Then downstairs in the hall they heard the quiet opening and gentle closing of the front door.

"It's Uncle George," Biddy whispered.

"Yes." Marna rose hurriedly. "Well—will you do this for me, Biddy?"

"You know I will."

"And will you promise me on your word of honour never to tell anyone—never to tell a living soul?"

"On my word of honour."

"This is the letter, then." She put it into the Little Flapper's unsteady hands. "Lock it away somewhere, Biddy. It's only to be sent if I—if I'm not here any more."

"Yes, darling."

"Thank you. Good night, Biddy."

"Good night." The Little Flapper let Marna go as far as the door then she leapt out of bed and ran to her. "Marna!" She flung warm arms round her and kissed her rapturously as she used to do when she was quite small, and Marna was all her world.

"I love you. I just love you," she said almost sobbing. "And I want you to be happy. I want you to be happy so much."

Marna laughed with soft mirthlessness.

"I used to feel like that too," she said half whispering. "But now I don't seem to care any more," and she gently unlocked the girl's clinging arms and slipped away as George Paget's step sounded on the stairs.

**I**T was Mrs. Blair who unintentionally put the idea into the Little Flapper's head.

John Blair came over to the Pagets' one evening in his two-seater car and took Biddy back with him to dinner.

"The Mater said she'd be pleased to see you if Mrs. Paget doesn't mind," he explained awkwardly.

He was always rather shy and gauche with Biddy; very diffident, too. He found her totally unlike all the other girls with whom he had been friendly, and he was not quite sure how she expected to be treated. She was certainly not in the same category as Dolly Benson, whose whole life seemed bounded by kisses and the things money could buy, nor was she in the same category as May Richardson, who thought nothing of donning heavy boots and breeches, and tramping miles over ploughed fields with him in the rain. John Blair liked May, and in some ways he had liked Dolly also, but neither of them had satisfied him; they seemed to need leavening up somehow, so he explained it to himself; he wished they had just a little more of Biddy's sweetness and reticence. So he had suggested to his mother that Biddy might be asked to dinner.

"It must be dull for the poor kid, with Mrs. Paget not well," he said with overdone carelessness.

"Isn't Marna well?" his mother asked.

"She looks rotten," John answered with candour.

He said as much to the Little Flapper as they

raced back through the spring evening to the Blairs' house.

"I say, what's the matter with Mrs. Paget? She looks jolly bad."

Biddy turned on him angrily.

"There's nothing the matter with her. She's been out with me all the afternoon."

"She looks jolly bad, all the same," he insisted. "If my mater looked like that I'd soon hike her off to some Harley Street Johnny——"

"She's been already," were the words which rose to Biddy's lips, but she checked them, remembering her promise.

"I think she wants a holiday," she said instead. "Uncle George is talking about taking us both away."

"You too!" he said in dismay.

"Yes. Why not?"

"I shall miss you. Come and stay with us instead. The Mater would love to have you. She likes you."

Biddy was faintly amazed.

"Why, whatever would you do with me?" she asked. "I don't play hockey, or do any of the things you like."

"You do lots of the things I like," John answered with sudden courage.

"What things?" Biddy demanded blankly.

It was too dark for her to see the colour that rose to his face.

"Well, for one thing you don't chuck yourself at a man's head," he said bluntly. "Don't be cross," he blundered on, as he felt her move a little farther

away from him. "I don't mean to offend you, but it's a change after the girls one knocks about with nowadays. Girls like Dolly, I mean."

"I thought Dolly was such a friend of yours," the Little Flapper gasped.

She was quite swept off her feet by this sudden attention. She had always rather liked John Blair, but secretly she had been a little afraid of him, knowing herself to be so different from Dolly and May Richardson and the rest.

"I haven't seen Dolly for weeks," he answered emphatically. "And I don't care if I never see her again. She's not straight—she seems to have gone clean off the rails lately."

"Oh!"

"Well, you know she has," he challenged her. "Not that I'm a prig, but well—there are limits."

Biddy thought there were too, and she wondered how much he knew.

"Dolly was very nice when we were at school," she said after a moment. "I suppose people alter."

"I should say they *do*," he assented heartily.

Biddy was silent, and incongruously her thoughts went back to the night of Marna's dance when Hugh Hubbard had walked in so unexpectedly. It seemed a lifetime ago, and yet she knew it was but a few months. So much had happened since then and yet so little! Her heart contracted with passionate pity as she remembered the happiness in Marna's face then as she danced with Hubbard.

"Poor darling! poor darling!" she said involuntarily.

"Poor darling!" Young Blair echoed sceptic-

ally. "I don't see where it comes in. If ever a girl has fouled her own nest Dolly has."

"I wasn't thinking of Dolly," the Little Flapper answered.

When they reached the house Mrs. Blair echoed her son's sentiments regarding Marna.

"And how is she? Looking half dead, I hear. Where in the world are George Paget's eyes?"

Biddy coloured in distress.

"I don't think she's really ill," she protested. "She gets easily tired, but she's not really ill."

Mrs. Blair said: "Humph! If I had a daughter who looked as she does, I should want to know the reason why—and what's more I'd find out." She looked at Biddy with her penetrating eyes. "There's none so blind as those who won't see," she said.

Biddy did not answer, but she felt utterly wretched. Was it true that Marna looked so ill? Was it true that both she and George were too blind to see how ill she really was?

"He ought to be told; he ought to be told." She tormented herself with the thought that she had given her word not to tell Paget of Marna's visit to the specialist. It had been wrong of her.

George loved Marna so much. If he knew, surely he would insist that something more was done—there must be other means of saving a life so precious.

The evening was quite spoilt for her; she knew that John Blair must be finding her dull and uninteresting, but she did not care. Marna came first with her in all the world; everybody else just filled the other places indifferently.

As they drove home John asked what she was thinking about, and she told him almost angrily.

"I am thinking about what you and Mrs. Blair said of Marna."

"It's no use worrying yourself," he urged.

Biddy's tears came.

"I love her best in all the world. She's been an angel to me. You don't know half what she's done. Nobody ever will!"

"I expect you've been an angel to her too," he answered gently.

But that only made the Little Flapper angry. She called him an idiot most emphatically and reminded him that he was not talking to Dolly Benson.

"No, thank the Lord I'm not," he agreed grimly.

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

When they got to Regent's Park there was a car outside the Pagets' house.

"It's not either of yours," John Blair said, peering into the darkness ahead of them. "Wonder whose it is?"

But they knew when they drew abreast with it.

"It's Dr. Liscard's," Biddy said, and her heart seemed to stand still.

She left John precipitately and ran into the house. The doctor was just leaving. George was talking with him in the hall, and Biddy heard him say: "She'll be all right now. Let her sleep. I'll call again in the morning. And remember—take her away as soon as you can."

He did not see the Little Flapper; he ran down the steps into the spring night.



"Uncle George," Biddy said tremulously.

Paget turned. He looked white and worried.

"Hullo, Biddy! Got home all right then."

"Is Marna—what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing very much. She fainted—quite suddenly she fainted. We were talking, and I had no idea she didn't feel well. Course I know a faint isn't anything, but she was so long comin' round. Scared me, so I sent for Liscard. He says she's nervy and run down. Must go away. Quite right, too. I ought to have taken her before. I'm a selfish brute."

Biddy crept up the stairs to Marna's room.

She was asleep. Her face, turned against the pillow, seemed hardly less white than the pillow.

"Darling," Biddy whispered, but she got no reply.

"Don't wake her. Liscard said we mustn't wake her," George Paget whispered. He had followed her into the room, tiptoeing as quietly as his big bulk would permit. "Looks bad, doesn't she?" he asked desolately.

Biddy tried to answer, but her throat seemed choked. She and Paget went out on to the landing hand in hand.

He went on talking, hopelessly.

"Ought to have taken her away before, eh, what? Mrs. Blair was right. She warned me months ago. Can't think why I didn't see it for myself. Selfish brute, that's what I am."

"You're not, dear, you're not."

"We'll take her away as soon as she's well enough," he went on, like a child trying to put

courage into his own fearful heart. "Where'll we go, Biddy? South of France?—that did her good before, didn't it?—or a sea trip. What d'ye think?"

"We'll see what Marna would like."

"Yes, that's it. Whatever she likes we'll do, eh?"

"Of course."

One of the maids came upstairs.

"Mr. Blair is waiting," she said. "He wants to know if there is anything he can do."

"You go down, dear," Biddy said. She felt that she could not face John again that night. She was afraid of reading "I told you so" in his kindly eyes.

She went to her room and took off her wraps.

Supposing Marna died? The thought turned her cold.

She could not imagine the world without Marna; everything would come to a standstill.

"And it's not a holiday she wants, poor darling!" she told herself. "It's not any holiday that's going to make her well again. It's just the thing she wants and can never have."

It all seemed so tangled and hopeless to the Little Flapper. There was no way of sorting things out at all. If Marna was to be happy George Paget's heart must break.

"It will break, anyway, if Marna dies," Biddy thought in despair.

She could not understand why such things were allowed to be. Life was a tragedy, a tragedy for whom nobody was to blame.

Biddy went to the locked drawer where she had hidden the letter Marna had given her. She looked

at the address, clearly written. What would Hubbard say if he ever received it? How would he feel?

"You've been cruel to her, cruel," Biddy whispered, as if Hubbard was there and could hear her. "How could you be so cruel if you really love her?"

To Biddy's youthful, romantic mind there was no reason why, if two people loved one another, they could not be happy together. What was the sense of everyone being wretched when with a little disentangling things might be put right for at least two of them. And as it was, none of them could be happy!

Paget came quietly to the door.

"I'm just going over to the letter-box post, Biddy. Will you stay with Marna for a moment?"

Biddy turned.

"I'll go to the post for you, Uncle George. *You* stay! She might wake up and want you."

Paget flushed pathetically.

"Do you think she might?" he asked. "All right—well—be quick then. Run all the way there and back because it's late. I ought to have asked John to take it for me but I forgot, and it's an important letter." He gave it into her hand and went back to his wife's room.

Biddy slipped into her cloak again. Her face burned and yet she was shivering.

Marna's letter to Hugh Hubbard was still clutched in her hand as she went downstairs and out of the front door and across the road to the pillar-box.

Such a lovely night—full of spring breath and the promise of glories to come.

"Why can't everyone be *happy*?" the Little Flapper asked herself again. "The world would be so beautiful if only they could."

There was a street lamp close beside the letter-box, and by its light she looked at the two letters she carried. One was addressed in Paget's big, scrawly handwriting to a firm of solicitors in London, and the other was addressed in Marna's dainty inscription to Hugh Hubbard, more than six thousand miles away.

"He'd come home if he knew that she was ill," Biddy told herself. "He'd come home at once, of course." And hardly knowing what she did, she dropped both envelopes into the letter-box.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XIX*

**I**N the morning the Little Flapper was terrified at what she had done.

She had betrayed a sacred trust; she had broken her word to Marna. She could never hope for forgiveness.

The worst of it was she knew she had done no good.

Supposing Hugh Hubbard came home? Biddy sat up in bed, her hands clasped round her knees, shivering with fear.

If things had been bad before, they were a thousand times worse now. Wild ideas of stopping the letter came to her mind. She would appeal to the people at the post office, beg and implore of them

if necessary, to give it back to her. Perhaps the box had not been cleared since last night.

Although she knew it to be a futile hope, as soon as she was dressed she slipped out of the house and across the road. But the box had been cleared twice since she had posted her own two letters, and she went back home in despair.

During breakfast, from which Marna was of course absent, she made an appeal to George Paget.

"Can you get a letter back once it's been posted?"

He stared at her absently.

"Get a letter back? Back from where, Biddy?"

"From the letter-box. From the post office people."

Paget shook his handsome head.

"Shouldn't think so. Never heard of it. Why do you ask?"

"I only wondered."

Paget smiled with a faint ghost of his old humour.

"Been writin' letters and regrettin' it afterwards, eh?"

"Oh no."

"Good girl. Never write letters and regret 'em."

He turned again to his newspaper.

"Marna seems better," he said presently. "More like herself, don't cher know. Think Liscard rather frightened me last night. Doctors are all scare mongers. Marna looks quite her old self this mornin', don't cher know."

"I'm so glad," Biddy said, but she knew that Paget was like a child who has been badly scared, and is only too willing and eager to be convinced that it was without cause.

"Seemed quite pleased when I suggested goin' away," he went on. "She began to talk about new frocks and things—quite like her old self."

"I'm glad," Biddy said again, stupidly. But she could only think of the letter she had posted, and wonder how far it had already gone on its journey across the world.

Later in the morning she went to Marna's room, tiptoeing softly for fear of rousing her, but Marna was awake, with wide open eyes.

"Come in, Biddy. I'm not asleep. I wanted to get up but George says I mustn't till Dr. Liscard has been. Such a fuss! and all over a stupid little fainting fit."

"It was a bad fainting fit," Biddy said. She bent and kissed the hand Marna held out to her.

"And what are you looking so serious about?" Marna asked lightly. "I don't believe I've ever seen you look so solemn."

"I feel solemn," Biddy said with a sigh. "It's enough to make anyone feel solemn when you're ill."

"I'm not ill—at least, not very. I shall be all right once we are away from London, and we're going soon—quite soon now—as soon as I can buy some clothes for myself and some for you."

Biddy's face lit up.

"Am I to come too?"

"Why, of course. Don't you want to?"

"There's nothing I should love so much. Where are we going?"

"We haven't decided yet, but wherever it is I've made up my mind to get quite well and strong again, and you'll help me, won't you, Biddy?"

"You know I will."

"And we'll go back to the old days, and be happy," Marna said rather feverishly. "We'll just forget everything that has made us feel sad, won't we?"

"Yes, darling." But the little Flapper thought of what she had done and was afraid.

Marna would never forgive her if she knew; Marna would never trust her again.

As soon as she could slip away she went to her own room, and sat down to write to Hubbard.

"If I write to-day it will go by the same mail as Marna's," she thought, with a last desperate hope of averting further trouble, "and then he'll know things are not so bad really, and that he mustn't come."

But her letter was a jumble of incoherence and earnestness. She told Hubbard the truth about what she had done, saying as little of Marna as she could, and taking all the blame to herself.

"... I don't know what made me do it. I promised only to post it if she—well, if she wasn't here any more. But last night she was so ill, and I thought—I was afraid something dreadful would happen. And I know she wants to see you so much—no, I shouldn't have said that. Please try and understand—it's so difficult to explain, and I think life is so hard—and it doesn't seem quite fair, and yet George is a darling and he mustn't be hurt."

The Little Flapper covered three pages with her incoherent distress and explanations, and yet by the

time anyone had read to the end they would only have gathered that Biddy was imploring of Hugh Hubbard to come home.

It was not what she intended to do, but the Little Flapper's heart ran away with her head as she sat and wrote to the man who had first attracted her girlish fancy.

In her distress of mind she felt that she would give anything to see him again, and feel the the strong clasp of his hand and meet the steadiness of his eyes, and although she told herself that she was writing to tell him that he must stay away, the cry that made itself felt in every line she wrote was "Come home, oh, please come home."

Then for fear she should change her mind, she slipped out and posted what she had written.

"He'll understand," she comforted herself. "I know he'll understand."

She sat with Marna all the afternoon, for Liscard had called and said that on no account must she be allowed to get up.

"Better, yes, she's much better," he told George Paget, "but a little extra rest will do her all the good in the world. Let her stay in bed."

And Marna was glad of the rest; glad to sleep and dream, and let the world slip by unheeded.

"I shall get quite, quite well and strong again," she said several times to Biddy, meeting the Little Flapper's anxious gaze. "And then we'll all go away and be happy."

She tried to believe that such a thing was possible.

"After all, will power is everything," she told herself. "If I say I will get well, I know I shall."



In the evening Paget came upstairs smiling and mysterious.

"I've had a letter," he said, leaning on the foot-rail of his wife's bed, and looking at her with adoring eyes. "Guess who it's from?"

Marna shook her head.

"I can't. I was never any good at guessing, and don't tease."

"It's from Hugh," George said triumphantly.

He screwed his monocle into his eye and produced the letter from his pocket.

"You'd better read it yourself," he said. "He writes so badly, I can't make half of it out. But one thing I've managed to decipher, and that is—he's not to be married. Never was! Says he thought we might have heard rumours, and that it's all rot." He watched his wife's face anxiously as he spoke, but could detect no change of expression. "Like to read it?" he asked again, rather stiltedly.

"No thank you. Just tell us what's in it," Marna answered. But her pulses were beating fast, and she was conscious of such an acute sense of relief that it was almost pain.

Like one in a dream she heard Paget's stammering attempts to decipher his friend's difficult writing.

"He says it's as hot as hell—at least I think the word's hell. Says he's busy—hopes we are all well. Had a good voyage out. Says it's all rot about him being engaged. Sends his love to you and Biddy. That's all."

There was a little silence which Biddy broke.

"Well, I'm glad he's all right," she said lamely.

George Paget chuckled.

"Yes, glad he's all right—good old Hugh!" He thrust the letter back into his coat pocket and beamed at Marna. "Made up your mind where you want to go yet, you two?" he asked.

"Not yet, dear. We're going to talk it over, aren't we, Biddy?"

"Yes."

"Right-oh! just let me know and I'll fix it up, eh what?"

"Yes."

But it was several weeks before Marna was strong enough to seriously contemplate going away. She kept putting it off with some pretext or another. The weather was too cold—she was too tired to think of packing. She liked her own home best when she was not feeling quite fit—she manufactured a hundred and one little reasons for not wanting to be moved at once.

Dr. Liscard aided and abetted her.

"She mustn't be hurried. Let her take her time." He assured everyone that there was no need for alarm, that Marna was slowly but surely getting stronger every day. Only to young Blair, who often came over, did the Little Flapper confide her fears.

"I don't believe she's really better. I believe Dr. Liscard just says that to comfort us. Do you think she looks any better?"

John answered that he honestly thought she did.

"She's so much more lively," he said. "Talks ever so much more than she used to. Even the Mater thinks she's much better than she was two months ago."

Biddy eyed him with suspicion.

"If you're just saying that to please me——" she threatened.

"I'm not. Honest Injun, I'm not, though there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to please you, Biddy," he protested.

Biddy made a grimace.

"Don't be silly," she retorted.

John Blair caught her hand as she would have turned away.

"I say, are you never going to be nice to me?" he demanded gruffly.

"I *am* nice to you."

"Is that the best you can do?"

Biddy wriggled away from him.

"Why do you talk like this? It's so silly."

His young face paled a little.

"You mean that you don't like me at all?" he asked.

"Of course I like you."

"Yes but—well, I mean—*love* me then," he stammered.

"Love you!" Biddy stared, her face flushing from chin to brow. "What are you talking about?" she gasped.

"Asking if you love me. You've got to love some day, and I'd treat you decently, Biddy, I swear it. I've never met a girl to touch you, and if there's no other man you like better than you like me——"

"There is!" Biddy said sharply, and a sudden desolating memory of Hubbard swept through her heart.

There was no man in the world like him. No man would ever quite take his place in her heart.

And yet there was no adequate reason for it. He had always treated her as a child, and she had always known that it was Marna whom he loved, and yet—

"If only I could see him just for a minute," the Little Flapper told herself wildly.

He had always given her such a sense of strength and security.

"I'm a fool, I know—a perfect little fool," she thought humbly, but it did not alter things, and her face was painfully hot and flushed as she looked at John Blair.

"Another man! Who is it then?" he demanded roughly. "I thought you didn't like men—you never seem to want to be with them—Biddy——"

Biddy pulled herself away from him.

"Oh, leave me alone. Leave me alone," she said and ran upstairs.

"Was that John I heard talking to you?" Marna asked when presently Biddy went to her room.

"Yes."

"Has he gone then?"

"I don't know. I left him downstairs."

"Biddy, you funny child! Have you quarrelled?"

"No, but he's so silly." Biddy frowned at the memory of John's eyes. "He asked me if I loved him," she admitted reluctantly.

Marna checked a smile.

"And—you don't?" she asked.

"Of course I don't. He's only a boy."

"A nice boy, Biddy."

Biddy shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I don't love him, anyway," she reiterated.

It was the day following that Hubbard's cable came from Shanghai.

Biddy was standing at the open door talking to Harnigan, who was waiting to take Marna for a drive.

It was a lovely spring afternoon, with fleecy white clouds in a blue sky, and pale sunshine everywhere.

"You can sniff summertime, Harnigan," the Little Flapper said delightedly. She screwed up her little nose and sniffed the air. "Can't you sniff summertime, Harnigan?"

Harnigan answered stolidly: "Yes, Miss," but made no attempt to follow her example.

Biddy chuckled.

"Do you ever get excited about *anything*?" she demanded interestedly, then broke off as a telegraph boy wheeled up to the front door and almost fell off his bicycle at her feet.

"Telegram," he said laconically.

Biddy took the envelope without interest, glanced at the name written upon it, and changed colour.

"Wait a minute." She fled into the house and into the library. She knew before she opened the envelope who the message was from, knew the minute she read her own name on its address. Careful calculation had told her that Hubbard must have received her letter and Marna's almost a week ago. She had expected that he would write to her in reply, but this cable—she opened it with shaking fingers.

"Sailing England July 1st.—HUBBARD."

"God," said Biddy in a little agonized whisper. July 1st! that had been yesterday. Too late now to stop him! Too late to undo the mischief she had already done—too late to do anything.

She felt cold from head to foot with fear. She felt as if no power on earth could ever again turn her into a living, human being.

Out in the hall she heard Marna's voice:

"Biddy! Biddy dear, aren't you coming?"

With a great effort she forced herself to answer:

"Yes, now——"

She thrust the cablegram into her coat and went out of the room. The boy from the post office still lounged negligently by the front door.

"No answer," Biddy said hurriedly, and with relief saw him cycle off down the street.

"Who was the telegram for?" Marna asked idly.

"For me—from John Blair."

Biddy had told the lie before she was aware of it, but to her relief Marna only smiled.

"Poor John! Don't be too unkind to him, Biddy."

The drive was a nightmare to the Little Flapper. Hubbard's message lay like a knife against her heart.

Coming home! For what? To what? She dared not think. There must have been something tragic in Marna's letter to have brought him so hurriedly; something—her thoughts came to an absolute standstill.

It took six weeks to get to England from Shanghai! That meant that he would not arrive before the middle of August. Well, anything might have happened by

then—certainly they would all be away out of London if Marna was well enough to go.

“What shall I do! What shall I *do*?” Biddy asked herself in anguish.

Marna touched her hand.

“What’s the matter? You look so fierce, Biddy, is anything the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing——” But Biddy’s voice was strained and unnatural, and Marna thought, as she had so often thought, of that day when Biddy had asked her for money—and had not been able to explain why she wanted it.

And she thought, too, of the day she had first seen the Little Flapper, and of the slatternly, drunken woman who had been her mother.

“She comes of a bad stock,” so George Paget had said doubtfully. “You never know when murder will out.”

Although Marna despised herself for the thought it remained with her.

Was Biddy doing anything of which she was ashamed? Sometimes it almost seemed like it, and yet, looking at the girl’s sweet face and open eyes it seemed impossible to doubt her.

“She’s a darling, and I love her,” Marna thought tenderly, and yet the vague, unhappy suspicion was there and could not quite be chased away.

“We all want a holiday,” she told herself. “It will do us all good to go somewhere fresh and have a change.”

But she never dreamed of the tragic surprise which George Paget suddenly sprung upon them at dinner that evening.

He was looking unusually handsome and pleased with himself, and as soon as the coffee was brought he lit a cigar and looked at his wife.

"Well, have you made up your mind where we are to go yet?"

Marna smiled and shook her head.

"We're always talking about it, but so far we haven't made any decision, have we, Biddy?"

"No, there are so many lovely places, Uncle George."

"So many that you can't make up your minds, eh? Well, I've made 'em up for you." He beamed like a delighted schoolboy. "We're going out to Shanghai to see Hugh," he said.

In the silence that followed one could have heard a pin drop. Marna sat like a marble figure, her eyes fixed on her husband's face.

"Shanghai!" her lips framed the word silently.

"Often promised him we'd go, don't cher know," Paget blundered on. He was so pleased with himself that he could not see the dismay his announcement had caused. He thought he had been very clever in arriving at such a decision. He thought it was a last handsome apology to his wife for his baseless suspicions. "Lovely country! Glorious sea trip. Do us all the good in the world. Well, what do you say?"

Marna tried to find her voice and failed, and it was Biddy who said weakly and foolishly:

"Perhaps we shan't be able to get a boat."

In her heart she was hoping wildly that all the boats to China would sink to the bottom of the sea; she felt that she was in the throes of a nightmare.



Going to Shanghai! when Hugh was already on his way home.

"Oh, I've booked the passages already," Paget said breezily. He felt himself to be a very fine fellow indeed. "You've had long enough to make up your minds, and you haven't done it, so now it's been done for you, eh what?" He looked from Marna to Biddy, smiling happily. "I've left you nearly three weeks to buy all the fal-lals you want," he told them. "We sail on the twenty-first."

The twenty-first! Biddy caught her breath with a little choking gasp. She looked at Marna, a suddenly radiant Marna with a rose flush in her cheeks and a new light in her eyes.

Marna was glad, *glad!*

The Little Flapper's heart stood still before the light in Marna's eyes.

They were to sail on the twenty-first, which meant that somewhere on the sea going out to Hugh, they would pass him coming home.

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*The Luckiest Lady**Chapter XX*

THE Little Flapper's troubles seemed to grow thick and fast. Dinner was hardly over when Dolly Benson rang up on the 'phone.

"Dolly!" Biddy stared wide-eyed at the maid who brought the message. Dolly was the last person in the world whom she wished to see at that moment.

"Why—why, I haven't seen her for weeks," she appealed to Marna.

Marna smiled.

"Well, run along and see what she wants," she said.

The Little Flapper obeyed with dragging feet.

"Everything always comes together," she told herself with a sense of disaster. "And we were so happy!"

She tried to speak to Dolly in a friendly voice, but it was difficult.

"I never expected to hear from you again," she said.

"Never wanted to perhaps," Dolly retorted rather sharply from the other end of the wire.

"Don't be silly. Where have you been?"

"Oh, all over the place." There was a little pause, then: "Can I come and see you to-morrow?" the Big Flapper asked.

"No, at least—Marna isn't very well." Biddy made flurried excuses. "She's been very ill, and we're all going away soon. If it's anything important——"

"It is."

"I'll come out to tea with you then. Where are you staying?"

Dolly laughed rather bitterly.

"Oh, you wouldn't care for the place I'm staying in. I'll meet you at a teashop somewhere—Fuller's in Regent Street."

"All right. What time?"

"Half-past three."

"If I can."

"Of course you can if you choose," Dolly said sharply.

"All right."

The Little Flapper went back to the drawing-room with a heavy heart.

"She wants me to go out to tea with her to-morrow," she told Marna stiffly.

She tried to speak as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, but she could not meet Marna's eyes.

"You don't seem very pleased about it," Marna said amusedly.

"I'm not." The Little Flapper sat down on her favourite humpty in a forlorn heap. "I'm not such good friends with Dolly as I used to be," she said with a sigh. "She's—well, she's so different to me."

"The Lord be praised!" George Paget struck in devoutly. "Last time I saw that girl, thought she'd changed beyond recognition. What's the matter with her, eh? What's her mother doin' to allow her to run wild like she is?"

"Dolly's not very good friends with her people," Biddy said reluctantly.

"Poor Dolly, I'm sorry for her," Marna said.

Biddy flushed.

"You needn't be; she—she——" she broke off.

"There's no need to be sorry for her," she added rather bluntly.

But in a vague way the Little Flapper felt sorry for Dolly herself when at a quarter to four the following afternoon they came face to face.

It was a cloudy, chill day, with a keen east wind blowing, and the violets and daffodils in the

Piccadilly flower-women's big baskets looked nipped and unhappy.

Dolly looked unhappy too, in spite of a generous application of rouge and lipstick.

"She looks common!" Biddy told herself with a little shrinking feeling. "And *old!*" And yet she knew that Dolly was very little her senior.

"What a smart get-up," was Dolly's envious greeting. She eyed the Little Flapper up and down. "Cost pounds, I suppose. Is that a real ermine tie?"

"Yes."

"The Pagets must be rolling, simply rolling!" Dolly said bitterly. She gave an angry twitch to her own cheap fur collar and led the way into the tea-room. "What's the matter with Marna?" she asked bluntly.

"We don't really know. She's just run down I think."

"Run down! with all her money! Lucky women like Marna have no right to get run down," Dolly scoffed.

"I don't know that she is so very lucky," the Little Flapper said sharply, then pulled herself up.

"Nothing's lucky if you're not well," she amended her words.

"She's moping for Hugh Hubbard, that's what's the matter with her!" the Big Flapper declared. "I know how it feels—I've had some."

"Dolly! what *do* you mean?"

Dolly laughed mirthlessly.

"I forgot what an innocent you are. Well—it

doesn't matter about me and my affairs. I didn't meet you to talk about them."

"Why did you meet me then?"

The two girls looked at one another steadily across the marble-topped table, and the Little Flapper knew what was coming before she heard it spoken.

"Because I want some more money."

Biddy drew back, her face flushing.

"You can't have it; at least, not from me. I told you before how impossible it was——"

"I know, but you managed to get it all the same."

"I never could again."

Dolly laughed.

"We shall see. I thought I'd give you the first chance, and if you won't do it I'm going straight to George Paget. It's all bunkum, this pretending to shield Marna and keep George in the dark. He knows!—or if he doesn't, he's a bigger fool than I thought him. Why, *everyone* knows! Even the Blairs! That's what John and I had such an almighty row about."

"I don't believe you."

"Don't believe me! It's true, all the same! Ask him if you like. Mrs. Blair knows. I don't know how she found out and I don't care, but if you don't help me——"

"Dolly," said the Little Flapper brokenly, "do you know how wicked you are?"

"Wicked!" Dolly shrugged her shoulders. "It all depends what you mean by wicked. Everyone has to have money——"

"Why don't you ask your people?"

"My people! Good lord, I haven't seen them for months."

The Little Flapper stared helplessly.

"Not your mother or father?" she gasped.

"Not one of them, and what's more, I don't want to! They kicked me out when they knew about Renny Martin."

"About—what do you mean? What about him?"

There was a vixenish little gleam in Dolly Benson's eyes.

"Do you mean that you don't know? Lord, I thought all the world knew that I'd been in Paris with him for the last month," she said coolly.

"Dolly!"

The Little Flapper was almost breathless with dismay. She hardly understood what the elder girl meant, and yet at the back of her mind was a lurking knowledge, like a sinister shadow. Dolly and Renny Martin! She had always hated Martin and instinctively distrusted him; and now——

"Paris! for a month!" she said again helplessly.

"Then—then—where is he now?"

"In London, broke, like I am. That's why——" She leaned over suddenly and clutched Biddy's hand.

"Help me, please help me," she almost whimpered.

"If I can't get any money he'll throw me out like they did at home. He's getting tired of me already. I try not to see it, but I know it's true, all the same. You don't know what it feels like Biddy, to care for someone so much—so much——" She was almost sobbing, but with a great effort she controlled herself.

The Little Flapper was white to the lips; she could only stare at Dolly with tragic eyes.

"But he's so—*old!*" she broke out.

"Old! what does *that* matter? He's the only man I shall ever care about. I know he's a rotter, but I don't care. You *don't* care if you love a man. I just want to be with him for the rest of my life, that's all, and he won't let me stay if I can't get some money from somewhere."

"Does he know you've come to me for it?" Biddy asked with stiff lips

"Of course."

"Did he—did he know before?"

"Yes."

Biddy drew her hand away with a little shiver.

"I can't help you," she said painfully. "I can't give you anything except what I've got here now. It's about thirty shillings I think, and——"

Dolly broke into scornful laughter.

"Thirty shillings! What use do you think that is to us?" she asked hoarsely. "You might as well throw it into the gutter as offer it to me——"

"It's all I've got."

"The Pagets are as rich as Croesus."

"That's nothing to do with me."

"You could get it from them easily if you liked. They'd give you anything."

"I'd rather die than ask them again. Marna was unhappy about it before."

"She'll be more unhappy if I go and tell George what I know."

The Little Flapper's eyes blazed.

"You're a beast, a beast——" she almost sobbed.

"And I thought you were my friend."

Dolly Benson winced, but almost immediately she was laughing.

"What do I care! I don't care about anything except Renny."

"How can you! How *can* you! He's horrible."

"If you talk so loudly everyone will hear; and then we shall be thrown out," Dolly warned.

Biddy wiped the tears from her eyes with a shaking hand. They were tears of rage and disillusionment. She felt as if this could not really be happening at all; she tried to believe that she was just dreaming it, but Dolly's face was real enough—real in its pitiful unhappiness beneath all its rouge and powder.

She might have been a woman of thirty instead of a girl still in her teens; there was a hard look of unhappy experience in her eyes, and bitter lines around her mouth.

It seemed impossible to Biddy that so short a while ago they had both been happy schoolgirls; she felt as if a hundred years separated her from this new, strange ground upon which Dolly Benson so tragically stood.

"You'd better have a cake and drink some tea," Dolly said hardily. "The waitress is staring at us as it is."

"I don't care. It would choke me if I tried to eat."

"Well, I'm hungry," Dolly said. She finished her meal in silence. "You can pay," she informed Biddy. "I've only just got enough for a taxi back to—to where I'm staying."

"Can't you go on a 'bus? It's much cheaper," the Little Flapper reminded her.



"I hate 'buses. Besides, why should I? Other girls have everything they want."

Biddy had no reply; she took the bill and paid it, and a moment later they were out on the path again.

It was getting dusk, and many of the shop windows were already lit up.

"If only I'd got your money," Dolly said.

"I haven't got any money," Biddy answered. "Everything I have is just given to me by George and Marna."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No."

Dolly shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, we needn't argue. I'll be here on Thursday at the same time to meet you."

"I can't come."

"You must, and bring the money with you."

"Dolly, I can't. You know I can't."

"I don't know anything of the sort," Dolly answered fiercely. "You'll come, and if you don't——"

"I shan't come," the Little Flapper said again with a firmness she was far enough from feeling.

Dolly laughed as she turned to hail a taxicab.

"You will," she said with a comfortable assurance.

"And you'll bring fifty pounds with you or I shall go straight to George."

Biddy turned away without answering.

"It's horrible! horrible!" she said to herself shiveringly, as she walked away down the street. She felt as if she had just looked upon her friend and found her the victim of some loathsome disfigure-

ment. "Horrible! horrible! and yet I can't help her. It's not possible to help her."

"Did you have a nice time?" Marna asked when she got home.

Biddy shivered.

"Not very. I don't like Dolly as much as I used to. I think she's altered ever so much."

"Poor Dolly!" Marna said pityingly.

Biddy turned away, biting her lip.

At dinner-time, strangely enough the conversation turned upon blackmail.

George Paget came home full of interest in a case he had just heard about in the City.

"A man I knew quite well," he told his wife and Biddy. "Decent chap, too! Knew him quite well—played golf with him once, don't cher know!—been writin' blackmailing letters to Westram! You remember Westram, Marna? Decent chap—never did a dishonest thing in his life, I should say. Well, this other chap wrote to him and demanded a thousand pounds—threatened all sorts of things! Never heard such a colossal piece of cheek in my life——"

"What—what happened?" Biddy asked with an effort.

George Paget chuckled.

"Westram wrote and told him to do his worst and be damned, or words to that effect, and then went to the police. It's the only way to deal with a black-mailer. Not many of 'em dare go on if you defy 'em! Generally cowards, you know."

"Do you think they are?" Biddy asked hopefully. She wondered if Dolly Benson could truthfully be

called a blackmailer. Fifty pounds was not nearly so large a sum as a thousand, and yet she knew there must be degrees of everything.

"Always cowards!" Paget said again cheerfully. "The trouble is that some people get frightened—got no nerve!" He leaned over and patted the Little Flapper's arm. "Don't look so scared," he said affectionately. "Anyone been tryin' to blackmail you?"


"Of course not!"

Biddy looked quickly at Marna and met her eyes, and a sudden queer intuition swept through Marna's heart. Blackmail! Had anyone been trying to wring money out of the Little Flapper? A preposterous thought, she knew, and yet it was only with a great effort that she could put it aside, but it kept coming back again and again during the evening, and after Biddy had gone to bed she went quietly to the girl's room and spoke her name.

"Biddy! Biddy! are you awake?"

But apparently Biddy was fast asleep; so fast asleep that she never even stirred when Marna touched her arm and put on the light, and after a moment Marna went away.

"But I believe she was awake all the time," she told herself with a pang. "I believe she was awake, and that she was afraid of me."



**D**URING those days following his sudden decision to take Marna and Biddy to Shanghai, George Paget was a happy man.

By nature the most simple soul on earth, he felt boyishly that he was making honourable amends for his suspicions.

It was entirely foreign to his nature to harbour a mean thought of anybody, least of all of those who were nearest and dearest to him, and once he had made his complete atonement, he took it for granted that all was forgotten and forgiven.

"We're going to give old Hugh the surprise of his life," he said half a dozen times both to Marna and Biddy. "Jove! won't it be great to see the old fellow's face when we walk in! Times enough he's asked me to take you out, and somehow I never thought about it seriously. We won't tell him a thing—it's to be a huge surprise, eh, what?"

"He may not be there. I mean—he may be away," the Little Flapper said faintly. "Don't you think perhaps we ought to send a cable? He might—you never know—he might not even be in China now."

Paget laughed.

"No fear of that! Hugh never budes an inch if he can help it." He looked at his wife. "You're pleased about it, eh, Marna?"

"Of course."

It was impossible for Marna to explain what she

felt. She wanted to go; she felt as if the sun had suddenly begun to shine again in a world that had grown cold and grey, and yet she knew she was running blindly into fresh danger, tearing open a wound that had hardly begun to heal.

"Are you pleased about it, Biddy?" she asked the Little Flapper once, and it hurt her because Biddy turned her face away and answered evasively:

"I don't quite know. It will be lovely of course, and yet——"

Yes, that was how Marna felt, too, and she remembered her old suspicion that Biddy had cared too much for Hugh.

They were all at sixes and sevens. They each knew something of the other which they tried in vain to conceal. It was as if some demon of mischief was at work in all their lives, determined that they should never be quite happy again.

George Paget was the most contented of them all. He went about his preparations with boyish enjoyment. He bought lavish presents both for Marna and Biddy.

"But we shan't want fur coats out there, shall we?" Marna asked blankly when he informed her that he had ordered the finest sable coat in London.

"I thought women always wanted fur coats," he answered. "Anyway, we're bound to have some cold nights on the boat." He drew her gently to him. "I'd give you anything in the world," he said.

"You spoil me," Marna said, her eyes suddenly misty. "You're far too good to me." And the desperate thought rose in her heart that she ought to say once and for all: "We can't go. We

mustn't do this trip. It's not right. If you only knew."

A dozen times she tried to force herself to the point, but at the last moment her courage failed her. It would be like striking a happy child across the face if she told George why it was impossible for her to go to Shanghai.

"I've got the best state cabin on the boat," her husband told her gleefully. "And the kid's got one almost next to ours. She'll love the trip, won't she, eh, what?"

"I'm sure she will."

But in her heart Marna was not sure at all. Biddy looked unhappy when her face was in repose, and John Blair was loud in his lamentations.

"Shanghai! Good lord, you'll be away months and months," he said blankly to the Little Flapper.

"Shall we? I don't know. I suppose we shall," she answered listlessly.

"You'll forget all about me," John said jealously. "Why can't they let you stay at home? The Mater would be only too pleased to have you."

"I know. It's awfully kind, but I must go with Marna."

"She comes before everyone else," he complained.

"She always will," Biddy answered. "She's done everything for me. I only wish there was something I could do for her."

But only once had Marna ever asked anything of her, and that trust she had betrayed.

"What will become of us all? What will become of us all?" Biddy asked herself frantically.

She had written to Dolly Benson and refused to

meet her again, and all day long her heart was in a flutter of dread. Would Dolly keep her word and tell Paget?

"She'd never dare. It was just to frighten me," Biddy reassured herself. "Besides, there's nothing to tell."

She grew a little easier when the Thursday was passed, and the Friday, and Saturday morning came.

Perhaps George had been right after all, and the best way to defeat blackmail was to defy it.

It seemed horrible to call Dolly a blackmailer, and yet Biddy knew she was something very near to it.

"It's Renny Martin's fault. Dolly would never have dreamed of such a thing," Biddy thought loyally, but in that she was wrong. Dolly had one bad streak in her: she would have done anything for money. Even as a child she had sponged off Biddy to a shocking degree, borrowing her clothes and her pocket money and hardly ever returning either.

On Saturday morning Marna took Biddy shopping.

"More clothes!" Paget said when they told him. "Well, as long as you're happy it's all right."

He watched them drive away from the house with a feeling of pride. He was glad for the sake of his womenfolk that he was a rich man, able to afford a car and Harnigan, and all the other luxuries of life.

"They're worth everything I can do for 'em, bless 'em!" he thought fondly as he wandered into his study and took up a sporting paper. But his thoughts would not settle on the print before him, they kept wandering away to Marna and Biddy.

"The Little Flapper'll be gettin' married soon"; so his thoughts ran on easily. "Perhaps she'll

meet some decent chap in Shanghai. Must be a decent chap. Must have her happy! It'd seem queer without her in the house, and yet—we were always all right before she came, Marna and me."

It was rather pleasing to visualize himself and Marna alone again. The Little Flapper, bless her, had been rather a distraction. Naturally Marna had had to look after her and be with her a great deal. Not that he was the least jealous, but——

Someone knocked at the door.

"Hullo! Come in!"

One of the maids entered.

"If you please, Sir, could you see Miss Benson? She asked for the mistress, but when I said she was out she asked for you."

Paget put down his paper and rose.

"Of course. Ask her to come in."

George Paget rather liked Dolly, and was sorry for the vague stories he had lately heard concerning her. He did not believe half of them were true—but then, he was a man who never believed ill of anyone.

He poked the fire into a blaze and pulled up a second armchair. The spring mornings were still cold. He wondered if she would like coffee or a glass of wine. He was ready with a cheery welcome when Dolly appeared in the doorway. But the smile died on his lips when he saw her. His first thought was that she must be ill, she looked so white and strained, and then he knew he was wrong. "Ill" was not the word. His slow brain groped about and fastened on tragedy.

Something dreadful must have happened. Poor



kid! after all, she had been at school with the Little Flapper.

He went quickly forward, his hand outstretched.

"Why, Dolly, come and sit down. Marna and Biddy are both out, but if you wait——"

"I don't want to see Marna or Biddy." Dolly's sharp voice cut into his words. "I want to see you."

She shut the door behind her and stood leaning against it, ignoring his offered chair, staring at him in a fierce sort of way as if she was frightened of the thing she had come to do and yet obstinately meant to go on with it.

"Biddy hasn't told you, I suppose," she said after a moment.

Paget screwed his monocle into his eye agitatedly. He was not used to being spoken to in such a manner, and he was at a loss to know how to reply.

"Biddy hasn't told me anything," he said gently. "If anything is the matter, and I can help you——"

"He's left me," Dolly blurted out. She seemed only capable of thinking of herself: she passed Paget's words over as lightly as if she had not heard them. "He's left me. There was a letter this morning. He's going abroad, and I haven't got any money or I could follow him."

"My dear child——"

She stamped her foot in a frenzy of despair.

"You've got to give me some, do you hear? I must have some. And there's no one else I can ask. I warned Biddy, but she doesn't care, I suppose. Anyway, she never came, or sent me any——" She broke off, staring at him with tragic eyes. "Well?—well?" she said sharply.

Paget let his eyeglass fall; he had never felt so uncomfortable or bewildered in his life.

"Dashed if I know what you're drivin' at, my dear," he said blankly. "If you'll sit down quietly and tell me what the trouble is, Marna will be in directly, and I'm sure anything we can do——"

The hot colour blazed suddenly in her face and she took a step forward, her hands clenched.

"Marna! Do you think I want help from her!" she almost spat the words at him. "You're all crazed on Marna. Even Renny. I always knew he liked her though he did pretend it was me. You're all the same, you men!" she panted in her pathetic pain. "You always want the thing you can't get. Marna's the same. She's a hypocrite like the rest of us, with her saintly face and——"

George Paget took a stride forward.

"I'll make every allowance for your trouble, whatever it is," he said abruptly, "but if you begin to say things about my wife, I must ask you to go. We've always been good friends to you——"

She burst into hysterical laughter.

"Good friends! I don't want your friendship. I never liked Marna, and she never liked me. She just pretended. You think she's an angel! You poor fool! If she'd had her way she'd have been on the other side of the world now with Hugh Hubbard. She meant to go with him, only something happened and she missed the boat. Oh, I know! You needn't stare at me like that. I know a lot more too—and so does Renny. You didn't believe him when he told you, but it's the truth. Marna and Hugh Hubbard have always loved each other—years ago

they did! Ask Biddy, she knows too, only she pretends not to. Ask Biddy——” She broke off with a sharp little cry as Paget caught her roughly by the arms.

“My God, if you don’t stop, I’ll—I’ll kill you,” he panted.

Dolly laughed in his face. She was past caring for anything except the fact that Renny Martin had left her. What she saw in him to attract her so passionately God alone knew, but that morning when she read his letter bidding her a curt farewell and forbidding her to follow him, something snapped in her heart and brain. She was no longer a girl, she was a passionate, broken-hearted woman. She was utterly reckless when she came to the Pagets’ house, and George’s cheery reception had been the last straw breaking down her remaining shred of endurance.

She hated him for his happy face and air of prosperity; she hated him because he seemed to have everything whereas she herself had just lost the only thing she wanted.

It was with utter disregard of caution or diplomacy that she broke out wildly into the truth, smashing down his life with one reckless blow.

“You can sneer at me for living with Renny,” she raved at him, “but I’m no worse than Marna. She and Hugh Hubbard——” and then at last she stopped, silenced by the terrible look in George Paget’s eyes, for he knew that she spoke the truth even while all that was best and most loyal in his heart strove gallantly to rise above it.

“You liar! You foul little liar!” he panted hoarsely. “My God, if you don’t take back every

word you've said——" and then before he knew it his hands were on her throat. For the moment he was mad and blind with pain. It was only when she screamed shrilly and struggled wildly to free herself that he woke to a realization of what he was doing.

He let her go so roughly that she staggered back and fell, but she was on her feet again in a second and at the door. And before he could reach her or stop her, she had wrenched it open and was gone.

He heard the clatter of her high heeled shoes across the hall—he heard the opening of the front door, and its closing slam, and then a great silence seemed to fall on the world.

A lie! A lie! Of course it was a lie!

A thousand times Paget told himself that of course it was a lie; as he stood there shaking from head to foot, unable to move or even think coherently.

A lie, a lie, a lie! He found himself saying the words aloud in the silence till the sound of his own voice frightened him. Absurd to feel it so strongly.

The girl was hysterical, not responsible—and yet—something told him that she had spoken the truth. Hugh and Marna had always loved one another. A thousand little forgotten incidents came crowding back to him, linking together and making a complete chain.

He had been blind not to see it before; blind!

He found himself pacing up and down the room distractedly. What to do now, how to act! They could not go to Shanghai, that was certain. How could they go to Shanghai?

Oh, if only he could think clearly—make some sort of plans. A car drove up outside and he went

to the window dreading lest it was Marna and Biddy returned already. He could not face them, could not meet them yet. Biddy knew too! Biddy was in league against him, to make a fool of him. And he had loved them both so much; been so proud of them.

But the car went on again, leaving the street empty once more.

A clock somewhere struck twelve. They would be returning soon, at any rate, and he could not meet them until he was calmer, till he had made some sort of plans for his future actions.

He felt so alone—it was as if all the world had dropped away from him, leaving him in empty silence.

He went out into the hall and took down his hat and coat. A breath of air would do him good, and clear his brain. No good to do anything rash. Must be calm. He found himself thinking in little jerky sentences.

Marna had got to be considered first, that was certain. Her happiness was more to him than anything else, and if Hugh cared for her——

He was out in the road walking sharply along. He was glad it was a keen, crisp morning. He could breathe better now; the suffocating feeling was leaving him. He even felt sorry for Dolly Benson. Poor little devil! in her own way she was suffering as acutely as she had made him suffer. The difference was that she was young and would get over it. He was not young any more, and looking ahead he could see nothing in the future that mattered or gave him hope.

He turned down Portland Place into Oxford Street.

The sun was shining now, and the streets were filled with happy, hurrying people. A woman passed him in a fur coat—a coat like the one he had ordered with such pride for Marna. She would have been glad of it on the boat—but there would be no boat now—they would not go, after all.

So she would have gone away with Hugh but for an accident—that was one of the many things Dolly had told him. That was one of the things he had got to sort out of the confusion in his brain and get right. There were so many things, and they were all in such a muddle.

He stood for a moment on the kerb and watched the stream of traffic. He had always tried to live a decent life and do the right thing. It seemed hard that now, when he was no longer young, this crushing blow should fall and devastate his world.

How slowly the traffic passed! He wished it would move more quickly. He wanted to get on—to outstrip the thousand and one whispering, hateful thoughts at his elbow.

There was a break now in the incessant stream—people had begun hurriedly to move forward.

Paget moved forward too, close behind a school-girl with a long plait of fair hair and a satchel. He noticed her hair, because it was like Biddy's before she had it cut off.

Biddy! They had found a lot of happiness in Biddy since the night—that wet, muddy night, years ago—when they had almost killed her.

He was thinking of that night when someone

shouted—and looking dazedly up he was conscious of a fast car coming out of a side road. The schoolgirl in front of George Paget stopped, hesitated nervously, looking to right and left. Then she started to run forward right in the way of the on-coming car.

It almost seemed as if the events of that wet, muddy night, so many years ago, were being re-enacted, so Paget subconsciously thought as he leapt forward mechanically, and caught the girl round the waist just in time to drag her back from danger.

She was all right—quite safe—he began to reassure her, when suddenly it happened.

Even the onlookers were never quite clear about it. Some said he slipped—some said that he turned even as the girl had turned, wavering, first to the right then to the left. But at any rate the next moment George Paget was down under the wheels of the car, and the last thing he consciously heard was the girl's shrill scream of terror just as Biddy had screamed that wet, muddy night, more than ten years ago.

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MARNA and the Little Flapper were just getting into their car in Regent Street when John Blair rushed up to them breathlessly.

"I saw Harnigan—I knew you must be somewhere about," he explained. "I've been up to your place, Mrs. Paget. I've got my 'bus round the corner. I wanted Biddy to come out to lunch, if she will. I've got some tickets for a show afterwards. Now look here," he accused the Little Flapper almost threateningly, "you're not going to say no, is she, Mrs. Paget? You're going away soon for the deuce of a time and——"

"I'm sure Biddy isn't going to say no," Marna interrupted gently. "I'm sure she'll be delighted to come——"

"I thought you wanted me this afternoon," Biddy said quickly. She felt a little afraid of John Blair. Lately he seemed to have changed so enormously. He even looked at her in quite a different way, a way which vaguely disturbed her serenity.

Marna laughed.

"I can manage without you perfectly well," she said. She turned to get into the car. "Don't smash her up, John, that's all, and be in by six or I shall worry."



"I'll bring her back safely," he promised, but Biddy frowned.

"Where are we going to lunch?" she demanded.

"Anywhere you like. Why, what difference does it make?"

"I want Marna to know where we'll be, that's all."

John flushed and frowned. He was furiously jealous of Biddy's devotion to Marna. He answered rather sulkily that they would lunch at the Savoy and then go to the Haymarket theatre.

"And if you're so particular as to details we've got stalls," he said with sarcasm, "and the numbers are"—he produced the tickets from his pocket and carefully consulted them—"Row B. Nos. 12 and 13."

The Little Flapper laughed.

"Silly!" she said. She turned to Marna. "You're sure you don't mind?" she appealed again.

"My dear, quite sure. Run along and enjoy yourself."

Harnigan carefully wrapped the rug round Marna's feet and shut the door, but even when the big car was moving slowly away into the traffic, the Little Flapper stood looking after it with a puzzled expression in her pretty eyes.

"What's the matter?" young Blair asked grudgingly.

Biddy sighed.

"Nothing, only—John, have you ever had the feeling that someone is walking over your grave?"

"I shall have, the day you go to Timbuktú," he answered gruffly.

"As if we shall never come back!" Biddy teased him. She gave one last look at the disappearing car. "I've got the sort of feeling that something's going to happen," she said reluctantly as she followed John Blair to where his little racing car waited. "I suppose we're not going to be mangled between two 'buses or anything, are we?" she inquired interestedly as they drove off. "One of the theatre seats you've got is No. 13—it's a bad omen."

John Blair said: "Fiddlesticks! What can happen? What's the matter with you to-day, Biddy? You look quite sad."

"I've told you already," Biddy answered with a sharp note in her voice. "There's someone walking over my grave."

"In big, hobnailed boots," he chaffed her.

But Biddy would not smile. She really did feel depressed, and yet it was a perfect morning, sunny and bright, with all the breath of spring and the golden promise of summer in the air.

"It's my guilty conscience," she told herself as she sat cosily beside John in the well seat of the little car. "Things can't go on, and yet—oh, what can I do?"

A dozen times a day the full weight of her responsibility came over her like a crushing wave. Hugh Hubbard was on his way home to Marna, and Marna would soon be on her way out to him, and Biddy dared not tell anyone what she had done.

"A penny for your thoughts," John Blair said

suddenly, and Biddy gave a tremendous sigh and roused herself to answer :

" They're worth a king's ransom."

" All right, I'll give you three and sixpence for them," he promptly answered, but Biddy only frowned.

" It's not funny. It's tragic ! " she said.

" Tragic ! " He turned and looked at her, and was struck by the set look of her little face. " What have you been doing ? " he demanded, but his voice was kind—so kind that the tears rose in Biddy's eyes, and before she was aware of it she had told him :

" Dreadful things ! Such dreadful things that I wish I could die ! "

It was on the tip of his tongue to say " Rot ! " but another glance at her quivering lips made him change his mind.

" We'll have lunch first and hear about it afterwards," he said.

And suddenly Biddy knew that she would tell him ; knew that it would be an enormous relief to share her troubles with this big, blundering boy who looked at her so often with that new and disconcerting regard in his eyes.

And so over the lunch she told him, brokenly and disjointedly, doubling back on her story, and then racing ahead again, taking all the blame, shedding a few tears and wiping them away as quickly as they came.

Fortunately they had a table in an alcove, so that nobody was any the wiser when John Blair took her hand in his and held it in a big, comforting grasp

all the time he listened, and when she had finished he just said:

"Well, I knew most of it before, Biddy. I mean—about Hubbard and—well, you know."

"You *knew*?" she gasped in dismay. "I was so sure that nobody knew."

Blair nodded.

"Yes, I know—so does the Mater, I think—and I'm not blaming anyone. These things just—happen somehow, don't they?"

"Marna's such a darling," Biddy said passionately. "I'd die for her if it would help."

"It wouldn't." He held her hand a little tighter. "It is a bit of a mess, isn't it?" he submitted boyishly.

"You'll never tell anyone, John?"

"On my word of honour."

"Not even if we quarrel and never speak to one another again?" she urged.

He smiled and looked at her steadily.

"We shan't quarrel."

The Little Flapper relaxed with a sigh of relief.

"No. I don't believe we shall," she said contentedly.

This was a new John again—a dear John of whom she was no longer afraid. There was something in the grasp of his hand that gave her wonderful confidence and courage; something about him that made her feel as if he had taken all her troubles from her and was carrying them himself.

"And what am I to do?" she asked at last, realizing that her own new sense of reassurance

was not going to be of any practical help to Marna.

"That's the devil of it," John Blair said. He sat staring before him for some moments, then he said suddenly: "Have you ever thought of telling Mrs. Paget and letting her decide?"

"Marna! Oh, I couldn't. She'd never forgive me."

"You know that's not true, Biddy."

"I know, but——" The tears came again. "It's the only thing she has ever asked me to do for her in all her life, and I've let her down over it," Biddy wailed.

Young Blair looked furtively round. He was very happy, but he did not want anyone to see Biddy crying.

"They'll think I'm ill-treating you," he said jokingly.

Biddy dried her tears again.

"What would you do if you were me?" she asked in despair.

"I should tell Mrs. Paget," John said firmly. "She can stop you all going out to Shanghai. She can make some excuse to Mr. Paget——"

"But she wants to go," Biddy broke out in deep distress. "It's wonderful how much better she's looked since she knew we were all going. Didn't you see how well she looked this morning? She's bought a lot of new frocks, too—and it's ages since she was interested in frocks—— Why, what's the matter?" for John had suddenly released her hand.

"Nothing, only—I say, isn't it awful for George Paget?" he said.

There was a little silence, then Biddy said in an echoing whisper :

“ *Awful!* and he’s such a darling.”

They sat without speaking for a few moments. The band had stopped and the shrill voice of the call-boy sounded in the momentary lull.

“ Blair—Blair! Mr. John Blair——”

“ It’s your name,” Biddy said sharply. “ Listen! isn’t it your name? ”

“ Yes. I’ll see what he wants.”

John went down the long room and overtook the uniformed boy; in a moment he was back again.

“ It’s nothing much. I’m wanted on the ’phone. Do you mind if I leave you for a minute, or will you come with me? ”

“ I’ll wait here.”

He seemed a long time gone. Biddy sat with her hands in her lap, staring down the room with mournful eyes.

How could she tell Marna what she had done? And yet—in her heart she knew it was the only way. There must have been something very dreadful in that letter to Hubbard for him to have started home so suddenly.

“ And when he comes—what then? What then? ” Biddy asked herself frantically.

For as John Blair had just said, it was awful for George Paget, whatever happened—perfectly awful!

The Little Flapper shuddered. Someone had got to pay the price; the question was, which one of them?

Supposing the boat, Hugh’s boat, was lost at

sea? Wild, panicky thoughts flickered across her brain.

Supposing something happened to George?—dear, darling George Paget who had never harboured an unkind thought of anyone in all his life. Or supposing Marna—— Biddy snapped that thought before it was completed. If anything happened to Marna it would break *all* their hearts, not only just one!

John Blair was coming back. He was walking very fast, and yet he stopped for a moment to speak to the head waiter before he joined her at the table again.

He picked up her coat and gloves.

“We shall have to go, Biddy.” He avoided looking at her. “Put your coat on, dear.” The little word passed unnoticed by either of them. “Hurry! I’m sorry, but—something has happened.” The words struggled from between his lips.

Biddy stood up.

“Marna!”

“No, no.” He took her hand, gently hurrying her. “No, she’s quite all right. Harnigan telephoned——”

They were out of the restaurant now and in the foyer.

“You’re not telling me the truth,” Biddy gasped. She was as white as death and her heart felt as if its heavy beating must stop her breath. “You’re lying to me. Marna’s ill—you’re afraid to tell me. Oh, I wanted to go with her—I knew I ought to have gone.”

“No, no——” but his voice was broken by a

sob. "It's not Marna, I swear to you. It's Mr. Paget."

"Uncle George!"

"Yes. I'll tell you as we go. Be quick, dear."

He hurried her into a taxi; they had both forgotten that his own car was waiting. As they dashed along through the street he told her.

"It was an accident—I think Harnigan said in Oxford Street, but I'm not sure—he was knocked down."

"Dead!" Biddy whispered.

"Harnigan was not sure. They've taken him home."

"Dead!" Biddy whispered again, and only a moment ago some such thought had been in her mind. One of them had got to pay! That was what she had told herself as she sat at the table waiting for John. *One* of them had got to pay, and now it had got to be George—dear George Paget who had always so gladly and willingly paid for everybody.

She sat like a frozen little image during the short drive back to Regent's Park; she hardly felt anything, she did not suffer at all. There was just something in her mind that kept saying to her: "This is your fault. All this is your fault." And yet she did not know why she should think it, or be so sure.

There were two cars outside the house and the front door was wide open. Harnigan was in the hall, his usually wooden face all broken up and haggard with grief, and there was a feeling in the house as if someone had stolen over the threshold



and taken away all the light and sunshine and laughter.

John Blair looked at Harnigan and his lips asked a voiceless question.

“Ten minutes ago, Sir——” And Harnigan began to sob, noisily, the tears running down his wooden face. He no longer thought it “degradating” to show his feelings; he, like the rest of the world, had loved George Paget because it was impossible not to love him.

John Blair turned to Bidy, but she shook her head.

“No, leave me alone.” She stood for a moment, her eyes shut, swaying a little, then she spoke again: “Marna?”

Harnigan pointed silently to the study door which was half closed. The Little Flapper went across and pushed it wide. She felt as if she were moving in a dream. Dr. Liscard was in the room and another strange doctor, and on the big sofa in the window something long, and very still, lay covered with a rug. Marna was there close beside it. Marna with a face absolutely colourless, and eyes that just stared—stared into nothing.

Bidy stood in the doorway. A big bunch of violets which John Blair had given her were drooping and dying in her coat; their perfume seemed to fill the room, to fill the whole world—the Little Flapper could never again bear the perfume of violets. Then very slowly she went forward.

“Marna—darling!”

It was like a dream still—a cruel, dreadful dream. Here in this room where they had all been so happy

—here in this house of which George Paget had been so proud—tragedy had folded its wings and come to stay.

The Little Flapper put her arms round Marna's shrinking figure.

“Darling—oh, darling——”

The dreadful coldness of Marna's face broke up at the sound of the girl's voice; for a moment it was contorted with a tragic look of pain, almost physical pain it seemed, then she cried out broken-heartedly:

“He's gone, Biddy—he's left us—and I never asked him to forgive me—I never said I was sorry—I never asked him to forgive me——”

She hardly knew what she was saying, for the moment she was mad with grief and shock; she clung to the Little Flapper like a frantic child seeking protection.

Biddy looked away to that long, silent figure on the couch in the window.

“Someone had to pay the price,” she told herself bitterly, “but, oh, why couldn't it have been me?”

"HARNIGAN," said the Little Flapper suddenly, "how old are you?" She was sitting beside Harnigan in the front seat of the big car, her small figure almost completely hidden in the depths of a fur rug above which her pale face peered out wistfully at the foggy afternoon.

It was nearly a month since George Paget's death. Only a month! If anyone had told Biddy it was a year she would have believed it, and now she was waiting at Waterloo in reply to a wire from Hugh Hubbard saying he would arrive that afternoon.

The spring seemed to have drawn clouds and rain about its face, and to-day, although it was early June, there was a grey fog enveloping London and a cutting chilliness in the air.

In the last four weeks the Little Flapper felt that she had turned into a grown up woman, if not into quite a middle-aged one, which was why she asked Harnigan, with apparent irrelevance, how old he was.

Harnigan sniffed and folded his arms firmly across his chest.

"I really couldn't say, Miss, I'm sure," he said stiffly.

"I only asked," Biddy informed him, "because although I know I'm still quite young, I feel about a hundred, so I wondered how old you felt and how old you really are."

"At times," Harnigan said after a moment, "I feel as old as I look, and at other times, much older."

"I see," Biddy said gravely. "How much longer have we got to wait?"

"The train is late, Miss—fifteen minutes late. Owing to the fog on the line, I should say, Miss."

Harnigan spoke as if the fog were the exclusive property of the railway company. He hated fog; it dimmed the bright buttons of his uniform and necessitated extra work on the nickel platings of the car.

The Little Flapper was silent for a moment, then she said:

"It's a month to-morrow since—you know, Harnigan!"

"Yes, Miss, I know."

"It seems like a year," said Biddy, sighing. She leaned forward and peered into the fog. "Isn't the train signalled yet, Harnigan?"

"Not yet, Miss."

Biddy glanced up at him.

"I'm going to meet Mr. Hubbard, Harnigan," she said with a note of defiance in her voice.

"Indeed, Miss."

"Yes—but Mrs. Paget is not to know. At least—you see—she will know later on of course."

"Yes, Miss."

Biddy frowned in exasperation. She wished John Blair was with her. It was so easy to confide in John—so easy to shift the weight of one's responsibilities on to his kind and sturdy shoulders, but although John had offered to come with her, she had refused.

"I'd much rather go alone," she told him.

And now she was sitting here in the chill fog, waiting, and in a few moments more she would be face to face with Hugh Hubbard—meeting the steady kindness of his eyes, holding his hand.

The Little Flapper moved uneasily and sighed.

She wondered what he would say—how he would look. She had written a long letter to him which he must have received at Southampton when the boat docked, so he knew everything that had happened.

Everything! Biddy felt as if a thousand things had happened since that sunny morning when she went shopping with Marna, and yet only one thing had happened that really counted very much in all their lives—George Paget's death.

There were tears of blood in the Little Flapper's heart whenever she thought of him. It seemed as if with each passing day she missed him more, and realized more acutely all he had done for her—all he had done for everyone.

She had met Dolly Benson once—a pale-faced, cringing Dolly who had not breathed one word of her last interview with George Paget on that tragic morning. So much the Little Flapper had been spared at least, and nobody else who knew of her visit to the house had mentioned it. In the following tragedy no doubt it had been forgotten. If Biddy had known—but mercifully she was not to know. Dolly had been reckless and defiant.

"No more money to be got out of you now I suppose," she said with bravado.

"No," Biddy answered with trembling lips. "And now Marna knows all about the other too. Marna knows everything there is to know."

Poor Marna! Whenever she looked at her the Little Flapper's whole body seemed to ache with tenderness and sympathy. Even to Biddy's adoring eyes Marna had aged a great deal since George Paget's death.

She had grown so quiet—she so seldom laughed—it seemed to Biddy that she was like someone slowly bleeding to death from an internal injury. And yet Dr. Liscard said she was wonderfully well, all things considered; so much better than he had dared hope for. She had listened very quietly while Biddy told her about Dolly Benson and the reason why she had wanted that forty pounds, and when the Little Flapper had finished she said gently:

"I'm glad you told me. I used to wonder sometimes——" She spoke as if it was all years ago. "But it doesn't matter. Nothing really matters."

John Blair and Biddy had talked things over between them and had decided not to say anything about Hubbard's return.

"Wait till he comes, and leave it to him to decide," was John's advice, and the Little Flapper had eagerly agreed.

She was thinking of it now as she waited with Harnigan in the fog, wondering if what Dolly Benson had said when they last met would really come true.

Dolly had been brutal in her frankness.

"Poor old George! I rather liked him, but I suppose Marna's glad he is safely out of the way. It wouldn't have happened to anyone else but Marna. She was always lucky! She always gets everything she wants. The luckiest woman I've ever met."

Was that prophecy coming true, Biddy wondered, or once again was life to go awry?

"Things only end happily in books and plays," she told herself, and a new terror took possession of her.

Supposing the train had been wrecked in the fog—run off the line or collided with another?

It was fifteen minutes late already—supposing something dreadful had happened?

Biddy sat up, pushing the fur rug away from her.

"Harnigan——"

But Harnigan was sitting up too, and showing signs of activity.

"The train's just coming in, Miss."

Hugh Hubbard was almost the first man on the platform. The train had not stopped, and the porters had hardly begun to line up to the carriage doors when he was grasping both her hands.

"I got your letter. Biddy, how is she?"

So Marna was still first with him—still everything to him. The Little Flapper was ashamed of the faint, wild hope that had all day been fluttering in her heart, but her lips quivered as she looked up into Hubbard's face and tried to smile.

"She's all right, but she doesn't know you are coming."

"No. Well—you look cold. Come and have some tea and we can talk. Harnigan will get my luggage."

"Yes."

They went to a corner table in the station buffet. The tea was over-brewed and the toast was hard.

"It's margarine, too—not butter, I'm sure," Biddy said. She didn't care if it was; she was not in the least hungry, but it gave her a sort of passionate happiness to just sit and look at the man whose place no one, not even John Blair, would ever be able to take in her heart.

She felt as if she were a child again, peering over the stair balusters in her nightgown, looking down at Hugh Hubbard and Marna dancing together.

So long ago! So much water had gone through the mill since then, and yet it seemed but yesterday to the Little Flapper; but yesterday that she had heard Marna say, as if she had reached the end of all endurance and could bear no more:

"So it's all over, Hugh, all over——"

All over! No, it was just beginning, so Biddy told herself as she tried in vain to eat the thick toast and choke down the hot, too strong tea, her eyes all the time on Hubbard's face.

He looked tired she thought, desperately tired—or was it older that she meant?

And back to her memory came the tune of that haunting fox-trot song:

"I'll see you in my dreams,  
Hold you in my dreams,  
Someone took you out of my arms——"

Oh, lucky, lucky Marna! The thought swept through the Little Flapper's heart before she could stop it, but instantly she was ashamed, and the tears rushed to her eyes and trickled on to her cheeks.

"I think life's so—unkind," she tried to explain, meeting Hubbard's concerned gaze. "If someone's



going to be happy, it's always at someone else's expense—oh, why can't we all be happy? ”

He made no answer, he looked away, and a fresh fear seized the Little Flapper's heart. She leaned over the table and caught at his sleeve.

“ You won't go away and leave her again—not ever? ” she asked in an agonized whisper.

“ No.”

Biddy gave a sigh of relief.

“ No, of course I knew you wouldn't.” She pushed her plate away. “ Mr. Hubbard, what do you think of me for—for everything I've done? ” she asked with a trembling effort.

Hugh put his hand over hers.

“ What do you think of *me*, Biddy? ” he asked painfully.

For a moment Biddy did not speak, but she wondered what he would say if she answered with the words that rushed instinctively to her lips: “ I love you. I shall always love you.” But instead the Little Flapper sighed, then smiled gallantly to hide her pain.

“ I just think we couldn't help it—either of us,” she said. Then she asked what he was going to do—how soon he would see Marna, and Hugh Hubbard's face was quite transfigured as he answered:

“ I'm not sure yet, but it won't be very long, and then——”

He did not finish, but Biddy understood.

Then Hubbard paid for the tea and they went out to the waiting car, piled now with Hugh's luggage, and Biddy drove with him to the hotel where he was to stay.

They were very silent at first, then Hubbard said hoarsely:

"Don't think—because I can't speak of it—that George—George's death——" He could not go on.

There were sobs struggling in the Little Flapper's throat, but she kept them bravely back.

"I know—I know—that's like me——" she whispered. "But we've got to go on without him—haven't we? And sometimes—sometimes I think perhaps it was the best thing—for him." She was afraid Hubbard would be angry with her, but when she saw his face for a moment in the light of a street lamp they were passing, she saw that his eyes were wet.

And the Little Flapper's heart ached, and once again she asked herself passionately:

"Oh, why can't we *all* be happy?"

But somebody always has to pay the price.

She left him at the hotel and drove away again, well tucked up in the big fur rug.

"I shall see you again before long," Hubbard said, and held her hand hard for a moment.

"Yes," Biddy whispered.

She kept her eyes shut all the way home, visualizing Hubbard's eyes and his smile, and trying to recapture the sound of his voice. They were all of him that would ever be hers, she knew, and when they reached home, she opened her eyes with a little snap and let them go—for ever!

There was still John Blair in the world—kind John Blair—and old as the Little Flapper felt at the moment, she was still young enough to realize that there was much happiness in store for her, even if

perhaps it was not the kind of happiness she would have chosen had the choice been given to her.

For a moment she stood still in the empty hall, listening to the sound of the car being driven away by the careful Harnigan. A moment and it was gone—leaving the world outside very still and empty.

The Little Flapper's heart was empty too as she turned and went slowly upstairs to find the Luckiest Lady.

THE END

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